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Move
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THE NEW CONSOLE WAR
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SONY





When an interesting new videogame controller is introduced by one of the industry's Big Three, it's usually cause for fanfare. When Sony's Sixaxis was raised aloft at the company's press conference prior to E3 in 2006, however, the triumphant parping of brass instruments was conspicuous by its replacement by mostly confused grunts from the audience. Perhaps this interesting new videogame controller simply wasn't interesting enough. It certainly didn't help that its unveiling followed talk of giant enemy crabs as part of what will be forever remembered by those in attendance as an E3 presentation of knuckle-gnawing awfulness.

One problem was that the PS3 Sixaxis controller's innovation didn't involve the capability to unleash actual laser beams or dispense bacon (or, better, bacon cooked via actual laser beams). Instead, it made the mistake of offering functionality of a type that had previously been demonstrated by a competitor, and was therefore, to detractors, irrelevant and pointless. A joke, even.

That was four years ago. Since then, Sony has done a fair job of repairing its battered image. It's been a slog. It always is when you're climbing out of such depths. Now, though, it is back on the mountain and coming up with advertising campaigns that communicate the type of confidence and verve once synonymous with the PlayStation brand. If you somehow haven't yet seen the spot featuring Sony 'spokesman' Kevin Butler introducing Move, watch it now (tinyurl.com/nocrabs). Biting humour may underscore its messages, but beneath the arched eyebrows lies plenty of truth. While Microsoft keeps quiet about Natal, Sony is taking the initiative in this latest round of the console war.

Like the Sixaxis joypad before it, the Move controller isn't the most innovative device gaming has ever seen (other companies followed suit when Nintendo introduced the D-pad, too), but the key differentiating factor at its heart – its camera functionality – was in the works at Sony's R&D labs way back when Nintendo was preparing to launch its GameCube. Beginning on p60 we take a look at the modern-day evolution of such research, talk to two of the men driving its implementation, and play some of the early – and so far limited – Move games. Microsoft's response, when it arrives, should be worth watching.



Image from Killzone 2 courtesy of Guerrilla

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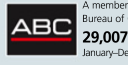
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"Death by stereo!"



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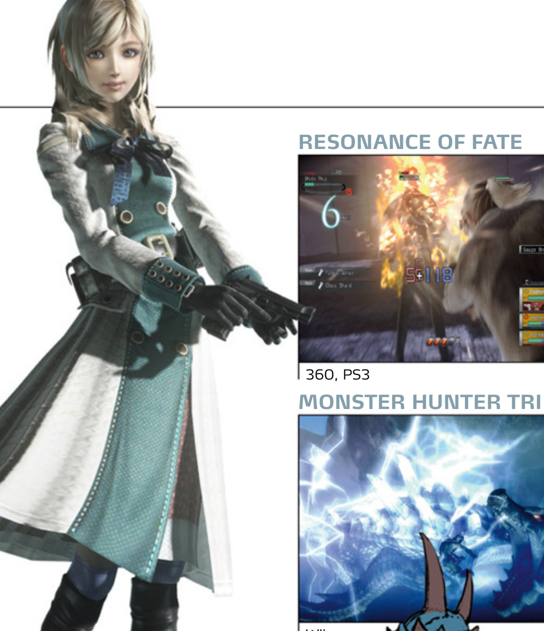
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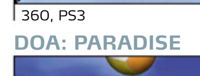
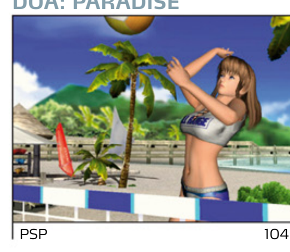


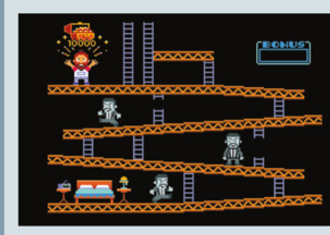



START













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How to make it as an indie

From the App Store to XNA, there have rarely been so many ways to get your game in front of an audience – but is going indie as easy as it looks?

It's never been easier to set yourself up as an independent studio. Open platforms such as Xbox Live's Indie Games and iTunes' App Store are democratising development on consoles as well as the PC, while tools like XNA and Flash lower the barriers to entry in terms of both cost and experience. Suddenly, designers who have spent years submerged within massive hierarchies – "devoting their entire lives to modelling footballers' noses," as Frontier's **David Braben** puts it – can suddenly have total control of their own projects.

This comes at a price, however. The lack of gate-keeping on many new channels has created a gold rush, and with initiatives like Ron Carmel's Indie Fund recently announced, a crowded marketplace is only likely to get busier. With 'indie developer' now applicable to anything from one- or two-man teams working out of bedrooms to squads composed of dozens of industry veterans, we checked in with a range of different designers to get a sense of the emerging independent landscape – and to pick up some advice for anyone who was hoping to navigate it.

A breakout indie hit of last year, transitioning from free browser game to an App Store bestseller with over 100,000 downloads, **Adam 'Atomic' Saltsman**'s one-button *Canabalt* is constantly mined for the secrets to its success. "I think *Canabalt* has maybe two salient 'lessons', but they are pretty obvious," offers Saltsman. " The first is that if your game is easy to play, more people will play. The other thing that I think I did right is managing to come up with an engaging look without using a lot of time or resources. If you want traffic and attention, make it easy to play and pretty. The trick, though, is doing that without ruining the game entirely."



"For me, the only useful definition of indie is full creative control," says *Canabalt* dev Adam Saltsman (above). "It tends to result in, subjectively, more interesting games"

"If you want traffic and attention, make it easy to play and pretty. The trick, though, is doing that without ruining the game entirely"

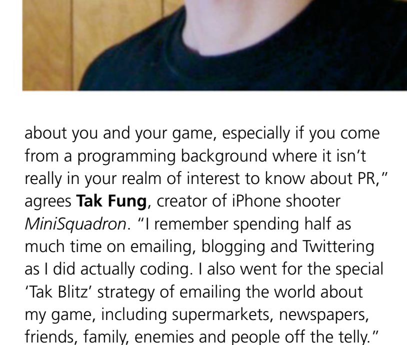
James Silva of Ska Studios, creator of *The Dishwasher: Dead Samurai* and *I Maed a Gam3 W1th Zomb1es*, agrees. "Start small. I just got a Twitter mention from a guy who said he's starting a game company and his first game is going to be epic like Lord Of The Rings. Maybe we live in a universe where that's possible, but I just can't see that working out. If you just set out to make something akin to games from the 8bit era instead, not only will you be completely bowled over by the complexity involved in things you took for granted, but you'll be one step closer to making something, well, slightly epic."

Silva's put his money where his mouth is. *Zomb1es* is a simple top-down shooter with a charming sing-along soundtrack, but it's gone on to shift 200,000 copies on Xbox Live's Indie Games platform, making it by far the biggest seller in an

Illustrations: **Army Of Trolls**







environment where 'hits' are often measured in mere thousands of downloads.

"I thought *Zomb1es* would get a little notice for being kind of funny," admits Silva. "The fact that it did as well as it did still confuses me, but I have a few theories: people love the song, people hate pretentious, unfamiliar gameplay in a title that they're not willing to invest a lot of effort into, and people love short, tightly-packed experiences that don't repeat and don't drag. It's not like I had any of those things as goals when I made the game, though."

It's impossible to imagine *Zomb1es* surviving in the traditional marketplace, but fellow developer **Jarrad Woods,** aka Farbs, who left a job at 2K Australia to make his own games, such as spaceship shooter/construction kit *Captain Forever*, suggests that indie development remains – by necessity – a place to do something different in. "I think the key to making it as a not-quite-broke indie developer is just making interesting games. As a solo developer, I can't compete up at the top: the man-hours total that goes into a mainstream FPS is longer than my entire lifespan. Instead, we indies have to work where the larger studios don't, back around the game design foundations. We have to invent new genres, revive the dying ones, or find new ways to meld old ideas together."

But getting the game right is only half the battle: with thousands of new titles coming out every week, indie developers are increasingly finding that they have to be marketers as well as designers. That means dealing with a games press that hasn't entirely worked out how to cover a glut of quirky little offerings alongside the more predictable major releases.

"I left the promotion and marketing until *Leave Home* was finished," says **Matt James** of Hermitgames, speaking of his XBLIG shooter. "Then I just sent emails out to the media. That seemed like a good approach, although only a small proportion got back to me. I did find it fairly common that journalists would say they like the game personally but their editor or audience meant they couldn't actually write about it."

Even bigger teams struggle with visibility, particularly for download titles: "When a game is released in the shops you get a natural amount of free advertising," says Q-Games' **Dylan Cuthbert**. "On the internet you have to try really hard to build up a rapport: it takes up a surprisingly large amount of time."

"You have to learn to shout loud and hard about you and your game, especially if you come from a programming background where it isn't really in your realm of interest to know about PR," agrees **Tak Fung**, creator of iPhone shooter *MiniSquadron*. "I remember spending half as much time on emailing, blogging and Twittering as I did actually coding. I also went for the special 'Tak Blitz' strategy of emailing the world about my game, including supermarkets, newspapers, friends, family, enemies and people off the telly."

As Fung suggests, traditional methods of publicity may be giving way to social media when it comes to marketing indie titles. "In terms of press, I sent out a release that virtually no sites picked up," agrees Silva. "About a week later all of the sites I contacted ran a story about the game because of all the reader emails."

Michael Michael of PomPom Games agrees that community can make all the difference. "Analyse the successful XBLA games and you see each is from developers who are awesome at getting eyeballs on their shit," he argues. "*Castle Crashers* isn't just a great game: those guys killed themselves making sure everybody had seen their videos ages before release. *Braid*? Mr Blow is an IP in himself due to his constant blog updates and the occasional controversial comment. You need to Tweet! Digg! Blog! Expose yourself! Getting the



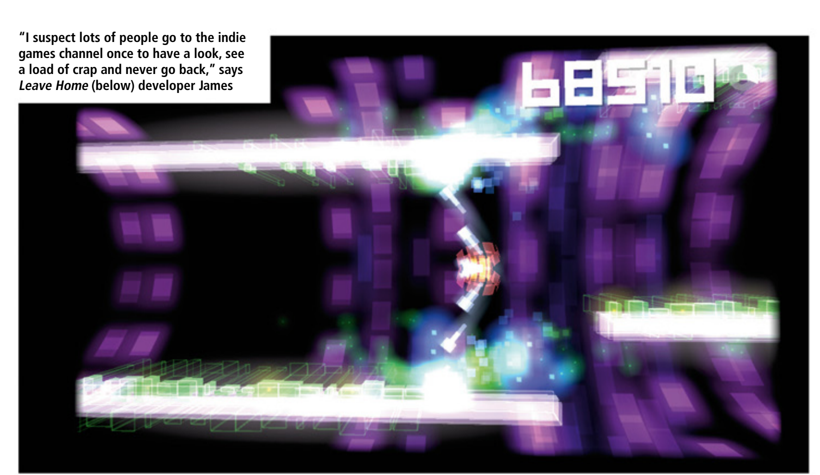


Care in the community

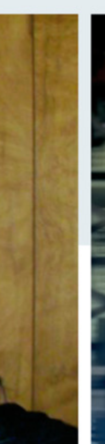
How getting players involved can pay off

While he may not have time to court the community as much as he would like, Woods (top) has outsourced some decisions to his audience. "I came up with the business model for *Captain Forever* (above) by throwing a few ideas around on my blog and talking it through in the comments. My goals were to get something out quickly while retaining the ability to keep working and make something much larger from it, and the players were keen to pay once and receive everything as it was finished. We came to a solution both the players and I were happy with."

"I suspect lots of people go to the indie games channel once to have a look, see a load of crap and never go back," says *Leave Home* (below) developer James









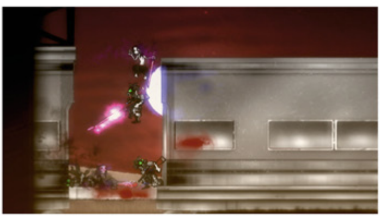


community involved can sometimes be the best marketing of all. Not only is the feedback handy, but it gets you noticed."

It's not something that everybody can afford to do, however. "Wolfire Games are great at this," says Woods. "They gave a talk at the Independent Games Summit this year, and you could see everyone in the audience furiously scratching out notes about how Wolfire has created such a huge community. Afterwards, someone asked how much time they dedicate to this, and when they revealed that it's a single person's full-time job, half the room crossed their notes out. Maybe Wolfire are on the right track, but I don't think many of us want to split our resources that way."

Visibility is particularly important given the dizzying array of platforms now available; for some, the very ease of getting to the market can be a double-edged sword. Flash development has long been a swamp it's easier to sink than swim in, and as services like the App Store and XBLIG aren't quality controlled in the traditional sense, it means that, while triple-A studios can plan their launches to go up against two rivals at most, every single day thousands of indie games are released in a rowdy babble.

This constant content bombardment has lead to a tiering effect, which increasingly shuts smaller developers out from the upper reaches where the press – and money – are. Xbox Live is a case in point, with indies' original channel of choice, Arcade, splintering into an elaborate ecology. "The levels of both marketing and content required have risen," says Michael, who admits that PomPom would struggle to get a place on XBLA these days. "The age of 400-point XBLA games is ending. *Mutant Storm Reloaded* was one of the first games available and sold a considerable number of copies. We did zero marketing for that. You can be sure if we released it into the simmering swollen cauldron



Of XBLIG, *Dishwasher* (above) developer Silva (above left) says: "I'm completely charmed by the concept of an official platform for bedroom coders to be able to put games on a console"

that is XBLA 2010, without any marketing, it would disappear without causing a ripple."

And it's a vicious circle. With Arcade repositioning itself as a more mainstream platform, it means that services like XBLIG increasingly have to support not only the bedroom coders for whom they were designed, but professional independent developers who have been squeezed out elsewhere.

All the platforms have their own quirks, of course: browser and iPhone games are easy to make, but hard to spot in a crowd, while WiiWare and DSiWare titles suffer from a lack of marketing on behalf of the platform holder. None of the indie routes to market are perfect, then, but Cuthbert suggests that competition isn't something to fear. "It has definitely got a lot more competitive, but that's a good thing," he laughs. "There are some great games out there, and some remarkably high budget games too. We can't compete with those budgets but we are learning a lot about making games as fun as possible with the quick cycles."

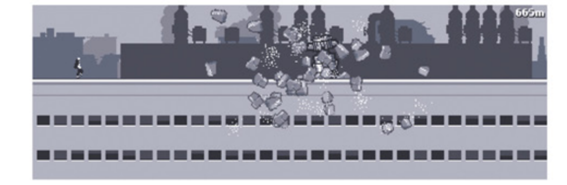
And while the chances of getting noticed may not be ideal, for many indie developers sheer self-expression is enough. "The cost of entry has never been lower with respect to the quality and quantity of tools and distribution channels available to you," concludes Fung. "The fundamentals of how a market works haven't changed – there's no such thing as easy money, and starting your own company and 'making it' is just as hard as ever – but, for me, being an indie is as personal as it will ever get. It is a clear and direct representation of my abilities, judged on a world stage."

"'Making it' is just as hard as ever – but, for me, being an indie is as personal as it will ever get. It is a clear and direct representation of my abilities, judged on a world stage"











Big Twitter hitters

Game marketing, 140 characters at a time

One of the reasons *Canabalt* (above) spread so far and so fast was due to the game's ability to export death 'epitaphs' directly to Twitter. "My friend Ivan was pressuring me to join Twitter for some reason," says Saltsman, "and I liked that Twitter had a very easy URL-based way of preloading the status field. I also liked the twitter demographic; author Malcolm Gladwell calls these people 'mavens,' people who take on the responsibility of finding cool stuff and telling their friends about it. Twitter integration in *Canabalt* is just a way of making that easier. It was pure coincidence though that *Canabalt* happened to have these 'epitaphs' when you died." As with any courting of social media, however, it can be a dangerous business. "There is a definite risk of severe annoyance when you implement systems like this," admits Saltsman. "But I think as long as they are meaningful or significant people don't mind too much. If it's a fun game that you can play just by clicking a link, and the message communicates something about your performance or experience, you're not going to really rub anyone the wrong way. If you have a good idea for a significant social aspect for your game, do it! Don't worry about the games doing it wrong; people like to connect."





EVENT

Social convention

Whether wary or welcoming, all eyes were on Facebook at Game Developers Conference 2010

It started at DICE. **Jesse Schell**, ex-Disney 'imagineer' and head of Schell Games, presented a 30-minute talk on the future of gaming at the conference in February. "Facebook knocked us on our collective ass this year," he said. Pointing to the rise of Wii, Achievements and *Club Penguin* and *Mafia Wars*, he showed how some of gaming's biggest recent surprises have played on psychology: the effect of bringing real friends into crudely-drawn game worlds like *Mafia Wars*, or *Club Penguin*'s trick of showering players with free money and asking them to pay a subscription to use it.

Schell's talk managed to set – or even define – the tone for March's GDC, which was renamed by some wags as *FarmVille* Week. Social games, psychology and friends lists were on the lips of many speakers and many more among its 18,250 delegates, who made the event the biggest yet, even if its structure failed to reflect particularly well the sea changes that the videogame industry has undergone over the last couple of years. Such speed, in fact, that it felt utterly natural that the venue, the Moscone Center, was overlooked by a vast billboard advertising gaming on iPod Touch, and inside hung prominent banners for *WarioWare DIY*: "I want YOU to create games". App Store gaming and UGC? Already old hat.

Jesse Schell's talk at DICE in February managed to set – or even define – the tone for March's GDC, which was renamed by some wags as FarmVille Week

Almost all of the most rapidly evolving areas in videogames were confined to summits on Tuesday and Wednesday, before the so-called main events of Thursday and Friday. Social and online, iPhone, which enjoyed a separate strand next to mobile and handheld, indie and serious games therefore enjoyed focused and self-contained time in the limelight, despite the somewhat smaller crowds, and ran uninterrupted by the attraction of Thursday and Friday's bigger names – Sid Meier, Peter Molyneux, Will Wright and Yoshio Sakamoto.

Most importantly, though, their messages were coherent and strongly imparted. Depending on who it was you listened to, the revenue from gaming on social networks will rise from $490 million last year to a projected $835 million or $1 billion this year. In the last month, 400 million people have logged in to Facebook and 200 million of them have played games in that time, said Playfish's **Kristian Segerstrale** during his Social And Games Summit keynote on why social games are videogames' greatest opportunity for growth. The franchises matter, he insisted, showing how the wild early days of the App Store, during which homegrown curiosities like



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Here comes the science bit. To be precise, the science of producing, designing and marketing videogames. With resources on everything from studio management to rendering hair for 'realtime game purposes', DICE's online publications hub is the substance behind the style of the main page. A resource for the academic and casual reader alike, it's a hive buzzing with design information and content that goes behind the scenes of the industry. There's stuff you won't get anywhere else, like a thesis on successfully harnessing the firstperson perspective and sense of speed, endowed with the hindsight of *Mirror's Edge*. But perhaps most useful to prospective game designers and rubberneckers alike will be the wealth of slideshows, direct from DICE's own library of pitches and workshops, offering a rare and comprehensive insight into a top-class developer's world.


Site: DICE Publications
URL: publications.dice.se

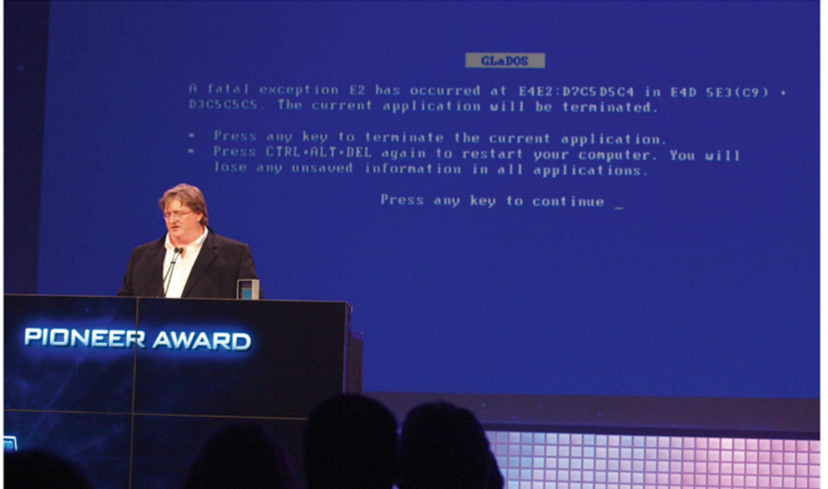


Crytek's CryEngine 3 was the star of GDC's show floor, displayed with its LiveCreate editor linked to PS3s and 360s which instantly and simultaneously reflected each update

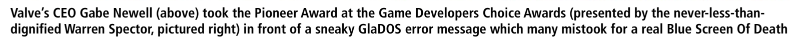











Valve's CEO Gabe Newell (above) took the Pioneer Award at the Game Developers Choice Awards (presented by the never-less-than-dignified Warren Spector, pictured right) in front of a sneaky GlaDOS error message which many mistook for a real Blue Screen Of Death

iBeer led the charts, are well and truly over. Last year's biggest sellers for iPhone and iPod Touch were almost exclusively based on existing IP, including *The Sims*, *Bejeweled*, *Grand Theft Auto* and *Rock Band*.

"Social games are not a threat," Segerstrale implored, suggesting that their rise is a natural and welcome course of videogames' development, since they're lowering barriers to the masses and therefore growing the overall gaming audience. Ngmoco's **Neil Young**, meanwhile, named the free-to-play model as "the most significant shift and opportunity since the birth of this business".

It didn't stop the many grumbles from the mainstream gaming attendees, especially about the rise and rise of Zynga's *FarmVille*. Barbs about *FarmVille* taking an unethical approach to its design, offering its 82 million players a low playtime-to-fun ratio and pushing payments and advertising to the fore, became a norm over the four days, and attitudes were only galvanised by Bill Mooney from developer Zynga's crass acceptance speech for *FarmVille*'s win for Best New Social/Online Game at the Game Developer Choice Awards, in which he claimed Zynga was an indie and suggested the audience should apply for jobs with the company.

Of course, *World Of Warcraft* has faced similar allegations in the past, and now its design is an indelible part of the gaming firmament. It seems inevitable that social games will only do the same thing, so perhaps the critics are simply afraid of change. And remember: some of the leading social game designers are veterans – ex-Infocom man Steve Meretzky is now a VP at Playdom and *Civilization II* designer Brian Reynolds is now chief designer at Zynga. Their examples show that if the game industry mainstream doesn't like what's happening on Facebook, then it should do just as Mooney said – join up, and change things.

More universally, GDC was about psychology –

Newswire



The gold standard

The process of deciding the winners of this year's Golden Joystick Awards will get underway when long-list voting opens on May 4. And in a change from previous years, there are no longer any console-specific awards. Instead, gongs will be handed out for the best titles in particular genres. More familiar categories such as UK Developer Of The Year, One To Watch and the coveted Ultimate Game Of The Year have been retained, however.

Any game released in the last 12 months is eligible for a long-list nomination, with the most popular titles making it on to the shortlists when long-list voting closes on June 1. A full list can be found at www.goldenjoystick.com, where you can also vote for your favourites.

Now in their 28th year, the Golden Joysticks are the world's longest-running gaming awards. They have also been recognised as the most popular, earning a Guinness World Record after more than 1.2 million public votes were cast for last year's awards.

This year's winners will be announced at a ceremony in London at the end of October.







the increasingly sophisticated application of understanding how players behave in order to make better games. Will Wright, in his surprise talk at the end of the conference (he was billed as 'Phaedrus'), spoke about how games work on three platforms – technology, culture and psychology. Sid Meier's keynote addressed the subject in some detail, noting his experiences with attitudes to battles in *Civilization Revolution*. He found that players facing 2:1 odds could accept losing a few times, but if the odds were presented as 20:10, they expected to win almost every time. More practical insight, however, was granted by Bungie designer Jaime Griesemer in a session in which he revealed how he balanced *Halo 3* using principles from psychology, and how half of Bungie's designers majored in philosophy.

The talks proved how, in an age of mass gaming entertainment, knowing the player has become a huge part of the game designer's job. And the social game makers, such as Segerstrale, are always keen to emphasise how they can release a game quickly, measure how their players use it using metrics and use that instantly available feedback to make it better.

"I've been a traditional game designer, basing my work on intuition because there was no feedback, and what I find now is that once you've launched you haven't finished yet," said ex-Firaxis man **Brian Reynolds** in a panel discussion called Next Generation Social Games. "When you talk about the metrics, it's the humility of learning that as intuitive designers you don't know everything." *Spore* co-designer **Chris Hecker**, as ever,











Talk of the town

Highlights from the keynotes, addresses and rants at GDC

■ Playfish CEO Kristian Segerstrale's treatise on social games was careful to address many of the fears about the rise of social gaming voiced at the conference, proclaiming it as videogaming's greatest opportunity for growth. This depends on a focus on quality, because in a connected world players tell their friends if they don't like something. Segerstrale said he felt the term "social games" would cease to exist in three to five years. "Everything will have social features – it will be the same thing as 'electric TV' – social will be a given."

■ Having produced franchises including *Metroid* and *WarioWare*, Yoshio Sakamoto was billed as having feet in both casual and hardcore gaming, but he was happier to describe himself as a niche developer. He related some of his influences, particularly horror film director Dario Argento, whose ability to manipulate audiences resonated with Sakamoto's wish for *WarioWare* to make players laugh. And yet he said it wasn't until he received handmade chocolates from a *Metroid* fan several years after its release that developers' capacity to touch players' hearts really struck him.

■ *Civilization* designer Sid Meier spoke about what he called the "unholy alliance" of designer and player, in which the player must suspend disbelief and the designer must satisfy the player's expectations. "A lot of what I thought I knew was wrong, and the reason was because I really hadn't taken into account what really happens in the player's game," he admitted. *Civilization Revolution* came up against the challenge of living up to player perceptions of in-game events: "Basically, the player will find the worst and most paranoid explanation for what just happened."

■ One of the few sessions to show off an upcoming game, Peter Molyneux's presentation of *Fable III* focused on his wish to continue simplifying the template laid down by the likes of his old love, *Ultima*. *Fable II* was meant to make the RPG more accessible, but he noted that user research indicated over 60 per cent of its players understood less than 50 per cent of its features, notably changing clothes and the system behind avatars morphing over time. The solution? A John Cleese-voiced butler to advise on outfits and the rule that if you use a sword, your muscles get bigger.





One of GDC's best parties was for indie expo Gamma, this year themed around one-button games. Some smartly designed efforts could be found if you could make it through the swaying crowd

vociferously disagreed in his talk Achievements Considered Harmful? "Everything was gut and by the seat of our pants. Then metrics came around, and [now] we're addicted to metrics. If I change a value of my purple hat, 14 more people buy it, and we think we're totally in the zone."

Right next door to Social Games Summit was the Indie Games Summit, which featured many more beards and far fewer suits, and yet a sensibility for business. It began with 2D Boy's **Ron Carmel** claiming that the traditional developer/publisher relationship "never worked" and offering in its place the Indie Fund, a venture he had founded with other notable indie names. What followed demonstrated the confidence and breadth of the indie spectrum and the extent to which it has matured, with John Graham's session on effective marketing and Colin Northway and Andy Moore's close look at how they monetised their Flash game *Fantastic Contraption*, while Randy Smith argued that indie developers are failing to capitalise on their ideas because their games don't present their charms to players with enough immediacy.

Not that there wasn't a little exuberance, too, with the audience lapping up Jonatan Soderstrom's seizure-threatening presentation on how cool it is to abuse players with punitive design and abrasive aesthetics, and explorations by *Monaco* maker Andy Schatz, *Canabalt* maker Adam Saltsman and *Aquaria* maker Alec Holowka into how indie creativity and freedom can fill the holes that the mainstream games industry can't touch.

It would be unfair to say that Facebook had stolen mainstream gaming's thunder, but its catalysing enormity and scope made the rest of the industry look scrappy in contrast

The energy and coherence of the indie and social game summits made GDC's headliners, interesting on their own terms, seem out of key. Perhaps it was the lack of huge announcements, aside from Sony's off-site reveal of Move (see p60). Molyneux presented the already familiar *Fable III*; Meier presented nothing new, even with *Civilization V* being shown at a venue on the next block to the Moscone and *Civilization Network* in production; cloud computing services OnLive and Gaikai still hovered intriguingly out of reach, even with the announcement that OnLive will launch in the US on June 17. It would be unfair to say that Facebook had stolen mainstream gaming's thunder, but its catalysing enormity and scope made the rest of the industry look scrappy in contrast.

"This is the best time the games industry has ever had in terms of variety of opportunities, of willingness to take risks," said *Sinistar* and *Indiana Jones And The Fate Of Atlantis* designer **Noah Falstein** during a talk on veterans flocking to social gaming.

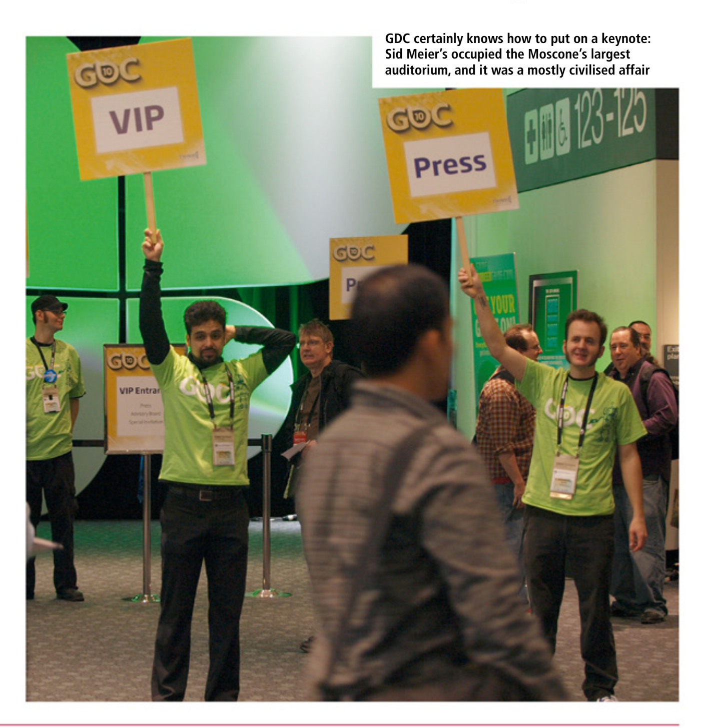
Which leads neatly to GDC's big takeaway. Jesse Schell implored his DICE audience to be the people who effect the vast changes videogaming is currently undergoing. GDC proved that, in fact, gaming's oldest veterans are already behind them, even if the majority is still finding the revolution difficult to embrace.



Whether you agree with what's said or not, the Indie Game Rant is always entertaining. A highlight was a plea from **Brandon Boyer** (above) for game journalism to improve. "Entertaining has trumped informing," he said. "It's helped create a cult of personality. Your job is to inform your readers. Provide information and context. I want 2010 to be the year we sunk snark." Capybara Games' Nathan Vella, meanwhile, argued that indie developers will "win" against the mainstream industry because of their collaborative culture, as opposed to being driven by competition.



One of the final sessions – a 'secret' one attributed to 'Phaedrus' – turned out to be a futurist lecture by **Will Wright** who, echoing Jesse Schell's DICE talk, said that the blending of reality and the imagined is 'really starting to happen'. "Virtual worlds are really becoming real worlds. The distinction is no longer useful." Just as flawed a distinction, he went on, is the term 'videogames,' which refers to just a subset of play experiences. Gaming's perspective on the world, the importance of play and the technology that enables it are crucial to understanding its future.



GDC certainly knows how to put on a keynote: Sid Meier's occupied the Moscone's largest auditorium, and it was a mostly civilised affair



INTERVIEW

Out of exile

Brian Fargo tells us why Hunted: The Demon's Forge takes him back to his roots

When **Brian Fargo** left Interplay in 2002 he ended a career path which, starting in 1984 with the foundation of the company, saw the development of titles such as *The Bard's Tale*, *Baldur's Gate*, *Fallout* and the latter title's spiritual forebear – *Wasteland*. Now, as CEO of InXile Entertainment, Fargo's overseeing development of *Hunted: The Demon's Forge*, a title which he hopes will re-introduce the dungeon crawler to a new generation. How will he tempt today's gamers to plumb the unknown depths?

You've mentioned that you feel the traditional dungeon crawler has morphed into something different over the years. Where do you think it went awry?
Well, I don't think it's gone awry, as such, but for me, there always been this core roleplaying experience – the romantic notion of travelling with your friends through somewhere like the mines of Moria. And the role-playing genre seemed to split into two things – the JRPG, with turn-based combat and a 14-year-old kid who's got to save the world, and the western RPG which went in the direction of *Baldur's Gate*, *or Mass Effect* and *Fallout*, which offer a different experience. I wanted to get back to the RPG roots of exploring a dungeon. I have this wonderful big television at home, and wanted that old experience, that feeling, up there on that screen.

What's the closest you have found to that kind of experience?
Really, it would only be moments in games, such as when you're playing something like *Oblivion* and are sent into a dungeon. Maybe something like a *Doom* or *Quake*, but nothing's given me that feeling for a while.

Does something like *Gears Of War*, with its different aesthetic but co-op gameplay, offer some variation of the joint adventure you describe?
Gears doesn't give me that feeling. You're running, you're running, you're running. It's got this breakneck pace – there's never that sense of wonder or exploration. I want that emotional feeling of a secret passage or cave door opening and the player thinking: 'I want to go over there!' At first people think that *Hunted*, with its cover system, might look similar to something like *Gears*, but our aim is to take those players and transport them someplace new.

Do you feel there's a tendency for certain game mechanics to be attached to certain themes and genres?
Absolutely, but the important thing is to understand why a mechanic works in its original context. When we did the RPG *Stonekeep* at

OUT THERE



IN SICKNESS, AND ON NES

These days, the simple act of proposing to someone by videogame has become as clichéd as the old ring in a champagne flute trick, which presumably is why two members of the Offbeat Bride blog saw fit to send invitations to their wedding guests in 8bit platformer form. *Darina And Niko's Incredible Adventure* is a two-level game in the *Super Mario Bros* vein, upon completion of which guests are rewarded with the wedding info. The Edge verdict? Beneath its sentimental façade lies a game derivative of a great number of superior titles which provides little to no challenge for the seasoned gamer. [4] We'll see you at the free bar.

www.offbeatbride.com



***Hunted*'s city in flames might be a fantasy staple, but Fargo promises to take players to some more unusual locales over the course of their adventure, with stranger sights for those prepared to wander**





Fargo (left) is particularly attached to *Hunted*'s dark fantasy setting: "When I was growing up, I was obsessed with fantasy – novels, comic books, etc. Some of the earliest videogames came out of that"





For more information on *Hunted: The Demon Forge*'s attempt to marry the co-operative online experience of today with the dungeon crawlers of yesteryear see our preview on p36



Interplay in '96, we borrowed elements from *Mario*, you'd not necessarily see them, but we tried to see what people had responded positively to in that game and apply it to ours. It's the same with the use of *Gears* mechanic here.

What do you think needs changing for the dungeon crawler to be a success with today's audience?
You need to recognise today's gameplay style. Things that worked in the late '90s aren't going to work today. Nowadays, you need to ease the player in. The *Gears Of War* cover system's there on purpose, we want the player to be comfortable. Today's games are kinder to the player, and tend to let people who want to carry on with an experience do so without getting stuck. Back in the day, if you couldn't finish a puzzle, you'd be completely stuck. Now, if you solve a puzzle, we reward you – you see different things, alternate paths, more story, and so on.

"You need to recognise today's gameplay style. Things that worked in the late '90s aren't going to work today. Nowadays, you need to ease the player in"

When you founded InXile, you described yourself as feeling the same way. Is that how you feel now?
[Laughs] No, that was something of a cheeky comment. When I was at Interplay, the company became something very big, but I prefer to be working closely with the products. There, my life had become one of bankers and roadshows, dealing with investors and so on, and I'm so much happier to be working directly on a title once again.

You don't sound too keen on your experience of the business side of the industry.
The lunatics have taken over the asylum, I can tell you that. I could tell you stories you wouldn't believe about the green-light process. We had a product, I won't say which one, which we pitched to one company, and didn't hear back. When we asked why it had been rejected, the publisher couldn't even say why. It's so expensive to make games these days, that they have to load the boardroom up with people from 30 different interest areas – marketing, production, and so on. By the end of the process they don't even know why something's getting rejected. And that's why I'm pleased to be working with Bethesda, because they're more like the old way of doing business.

What way of doing business do you mean?
I find the people who make the best games are the people who are allowed to say: 'I'm doing it my way,' like Blizzard, id etc. The guys at Blizzard were able to throw *World Of Warcraft* away and restart it halfway through. Most developers would never have got that second chance. It's the same for Will Wright – very few people would have ever been allowed to make *The Sims*.

So is *Hunted* the first product in a while where you've been allowed to get your instinct on the screen?
Absolutely, absolutely it is.

With that in mind, do your instincts point you in the direction of a return to any previous IP, like *Wasteland*?
Yes, they do. I have the rights to *Wasteland*, and I would definitely like to go back to the series which started the post-apocalyptic RPG genre. *Fallout*, of course, exists as a franchise because we didn't have the rights to *Wasteland*. When I look at *Wasteland* now, I think it was really the first sandbox game, you could go anywhere, do anything, and make moral choices and so on. In a sense, it started the move away from the dungeon crawler I described.





"Sony doesn't – and should not – own the concept of the Greek myths. Nor should they own the idea of mortals fighting ancient Gods, Greek or any other kind. That's all public domain stuff. But the TITLE? Sony DOES own that. And *GOD OF WAR/WAR OF THE GODS* seem a little too close to comfort y'all. Anyway, like I said, not my fight. I don't own shit!"
The ever-demure *God Of War* creator **David Jaffe** daintily encourages Sony to stand up for its rights

"Keeping the payer immersed in the world."
A Freudian slip in the review notes for a game which delicacy prevents us from naming

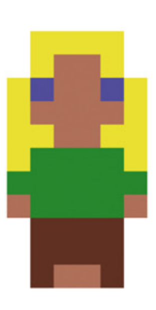
"Battlestar Galactica is a supremely gameable intellectual property."
Bill Kisbert turns on the charm and the lexical tricks

"New tax breaks are coming to halt the exodus abroad of game-inventing nerds."
The front page of the progressively minded **Guardian** reports on the UK government's proposed tax breaks for game developers

"CO-OPS (CO-operative OPerationS) mode"
Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker maintains the series' reputation for thinking differently

"Just add your favorite strategy to build your own iron empire and manifest the indisputable authority of the tank! Feel the TANK POWER!"
In our minds, MMOG *World Of Tanks* has earned indisputable authority

"I have control of the account. The enforcement team took care of it."
Larry Hyrb shows hackers another side to the acceptable face of Microsoft





INTERVIEW

Ghost driver

Independent designer Jason Rohrer on why human intelligence is "the most interactive thing we have"

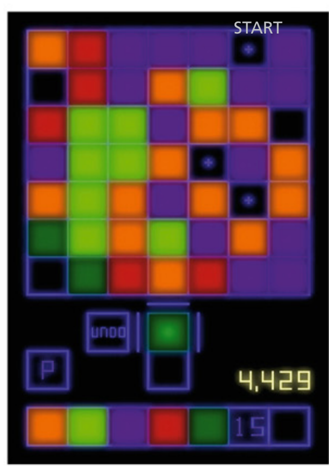
Jason Rohrer (above) has made a career of challenging assumptions. *Sleep Is Death (Geisterfahrer)*, his most recent creation, confronts expectations about storytelling and artificial intelligence. It's a twoplayer networked game with one player acting as master storyteller while the other is the main star. The game is a narrative chess match, with each player given thirty seconds to respond to the other's move, both trying to drive a story forward. The German subtitle, literally 'ghost driver', is sometimes used to describe a person driving on the wrong side of the road. Likewise, the game has a fixation on improvised experiences in the shadow of one's own mortality. We spoke to the art-game developer about his newest creation, his attempt to replace AI with human intelligence, and what that could mean for future games.

You've said this is your response to Chris Crawford's Storytron. To what in particular did you want to respond?
With Storytron Chris had these pretty complicated systems for people's internal emotional states, their motivations, and what kind of personalities they have. From what I saw, it still didn't seem like it worked in the way it was supposed to do, which was to make interesting stories with interesting characters you can interact with. I was thinking about that a lot, and it was really frustrating to me because I want to make games about characters and situations where people talk about emotions. I'm tired of having to do it abstractly and metaphorically, because that really limits the sort of topics I can tackle with my game designs. So I was thinking about that problem and people saying we're still 20 years off from being able to solve it. I started wondering if there's some way we could solve it now, and then I started thinking about sticking a human in the place of the artificial intelligence. A human could be in charge of creating believable reactions from characters and modeling their mental states and so on.

Is it fair to say that this is more of a tool, or do you still consider it a game?
Right, that categorical question – even though it's not technically a game as you play it, there is some competitive aspect to it. In some ways the other player is trying to break the story, or else trying to do something they know you can't do. And you're kind of sweating and trying to keep everything







Sleep Is Death **(left) hides a wealth of deep interactions behind its basic looks. Rohrer's previous games include *Primrose* (above) and the critically acclaimed *Passage***

cohesive in the world. It's almost like a tennis match where you hit the ball in the opposite corner of the court where the other player's not standing and you say: "A-ha!" Then they run over and hit the ball back, which you weren't expecting they'd be able to do, and they say: "A-ha!"

When you talked with Chris for 2009's GDC documentary Into The Night it seemed like he was coming to the end of his struggle with believable AI, whereas you're just getting started. Did you find it inspiring to talk to him or was it more dispiriting?
It was great to meet him. He is one of my game design heroes, but the Storytron parts of our conversation were somewhat depressing because he was almost on the verge of admitting that he'd failed. To see someone who is so smart and so talented fall into that tragic state where they don't even know what they're going to do next was heart wrenching. It also further disillusioned my fantasy that we'll be able to create computer programs that would do the kinds of things a lot of people are dreaming they'll be able to do. Once you sit down and you actually try and design something that works you run into all sorts of problems, no matter what your approach is. I think the hardness of the problem is of a greater magnitude than just finding the right approach. Talking to him really cemented my view that we're not going to be able to do it with a computer.

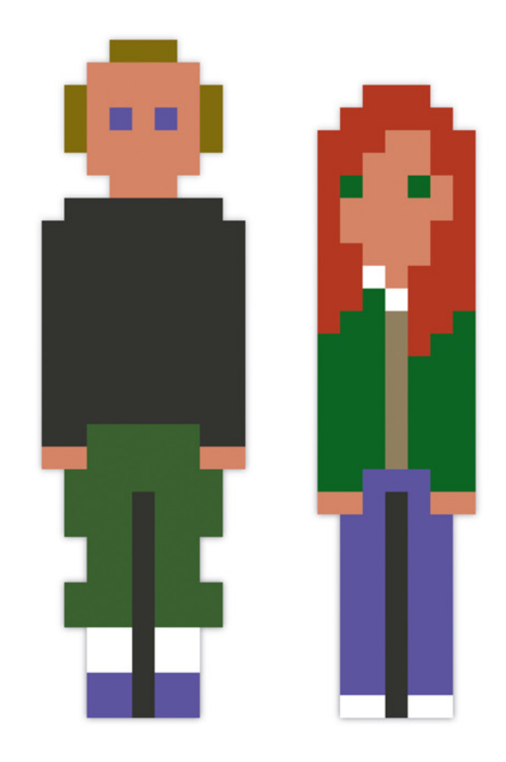
"We recount our social encounters as narratives. It's not so much about being able to tell a story as it is about making games about a social interaction"

Why is storytelling art to you?
I don't know that it is art. Someone could point out that painting doesn't have storytelling, dialogue or characters. Neither do most pieces of music, sculpture and so on. Obviously that's all still art. I don't think it's a necessary component of art, but when we're trying to make interactive art, and we look around the world for interactions that are meaningful, those things have to do with people. They're the most interactive things in our lives. I don't know that it's so much about telling stories as it is tackling issues, ideas and themes that are important to people and involve people. It's really hard to do that without invoking something that feels like narrative. We recount our social encounters as narratives. It's not so much about being able to tell a story as it is about making games about a social interaction.

How does death fit into the game's themes?
I think about death every day. With this game I settled on the title early on. It was more just a phrase that came into my head that kept repeating. It just felt appropriate. It puts an aesthetic glaze over it; hopefully it makes it moody. The background is black, the interface is sparse, it looks very primitive with these white icons – it looks very basic and empty. A lot of the stories I've told with it have moments that feel lonely. I like starting the character off by themselves in a room somewhere, having them run into other characters later. There's always blackness around them. With the music editor, I'm forcing a minor key. It's impossible to make a song that's upbeat sounding.

Is the physical flipbook you can create from screens of the game a concession to the fact that what happens in the interactive story doesn't become serious until it's recorded and consumable in a passive medium?
It is this weird hybrid where you're having an interactive experience while also creating this non-interactive experience for people to consume later. In a way it's sort of a machinima tool, but that doesn't replace the experience of being in the space while it's happening. For both the player and the person telling the story there's a tension and give and take where you're not really sure what the other person's going to do. That's probably the primary reason people would sit down to play one of these things together, and the flipbook is a souvenir of that experience.

How much preparation time do you have to put into the creation of a story?
It depends on how you want to use it. All those newly created objects are saved, for both the player and creator, so I think of it like looking through the closet in the old high school theatre department, seeing all these costumes from plays that have been used over the years. Very often you'll find something in there to use in the new play. You can just quickly pull a bunch of objects out and throw them on stage, sort of like an improvisation session. You're in a room and there's a hot tub, a bottle of gin, and a gun. What's going to happen here?







Suda may have taken a back-seat role on the sequel, but his presence still thickens the air of Santa Destroy

Continue

Dudley
A gentlemanly way to rearrange someone's face

GDC's Gamma party
Who knew so many beards would fit into one place?

Game Room's rewinds
The dirtiest feeling we've had in ages. But addictive

Quit

Online registrations
Let's just rub a bit of salt in the *C&C* player's wound

The streets of SF
One day, we'll learn to take a handgun to GDC

PS3 Linux
Come on, you were never going to install it, anyway

Touchdown touchpoints

No More Heroes 2 saw Grasshopper Manufacture's creative lead take a back seat on his pet project. We asked Suda if he can have his strawberry shortcake and eat it

Suda 51, or **Goichi Suda**, has never been averse to mixing up themes like life and death with a bit of porn and ultra-violence. In Grasshopper Manufacture's latest production, *No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle*, Travis Touchdown returns for another bout of headhunting, but the CEO of GHM has taken a step back from the design frontline. We ask what the future holds for everyone's favourite otaku developer.

In *NMH2* it feels like there's an exchange of cultural viewpoints – there's an American-eye view of Japan in, for instance, the stadium robot battle and conversely there's a reciprocated view of America, as seen in the gym culture parodied in the title. Do you make games primarily for the east or west?
I don't think about which market I'm targeting. When I write my scenario I just put all the ideas I come up with into the project, freely. So it's just a natural occurrence that it turned out like that. At the beginning of *NMH2* I began by creating something that I wanted to create – whether people understood it or not. For example the robot battle – if someone were into Japanese robot animes they'd understand the influence of the Gundam series, whereas western gamers may not fully relate to that. But that's OK – what's important is that I'm including the ideas I want to.

"In the collaboration with Shinji Mikami, he controls the overall direction and I just deliver ideas. But if I'm in lockdown with Mikami about an aspect that I like, then we work like brothers"

Are you recycling your games' strong themes of sex and death from other media, or are these your own comments and views?
Travis made me make the game that way. It's not my choice. I begin with the character and the project evolves from there.

How does someone like you, with a punk rock ethos, collaborate – most recently with Shinji Mikami? Is there a creative tug-of-war?
In the collaboration with Shinji Mikami, he controls the overall direction and I just deliver ideas to Mikami-san. I tell him how I feel about the project. But if I'm in lockdown with Mikami about an aspect that I like, then we work like brothers – Mikami-san even looks like me now!

You famously innovated with the Wii Remote in the original *NMH* – are you working with Microsoft's Natal or Sony's Move technology?
I'm very interested in the challenge of new hardware and experimenting with it. So maybe after reading this interview Sony or Microsoft will contact me and make it happen!

In the *NMH* series there's a distinct sense of nostalgia for old games – how does this play into the design of your work?
In *NMH1* there's an 8bit element, but you can't actually interact with that world. In the second game I wanted at least three retro games for the player to enjoy. I was really surprised by *NMH1* – I included everything I wanted to and it worked really well. As a result we kept the world of *NMH2* also really open to anything. It's a big world that accepts anything. Again, I was really surprised in the end.

Can you pinpoint a specific old game that's been an inspiration to you?
Elevator Action.

Your work is known for being very cinematic in its presentation – are you interested in working in the film industry in the future?
If I have the chance in the future, I want to do that. But it's difficult at the moment to allocate the time. In terms of videogame development – it's all team-based, so as long as I'm a part of that production world it's difficult to try something new.



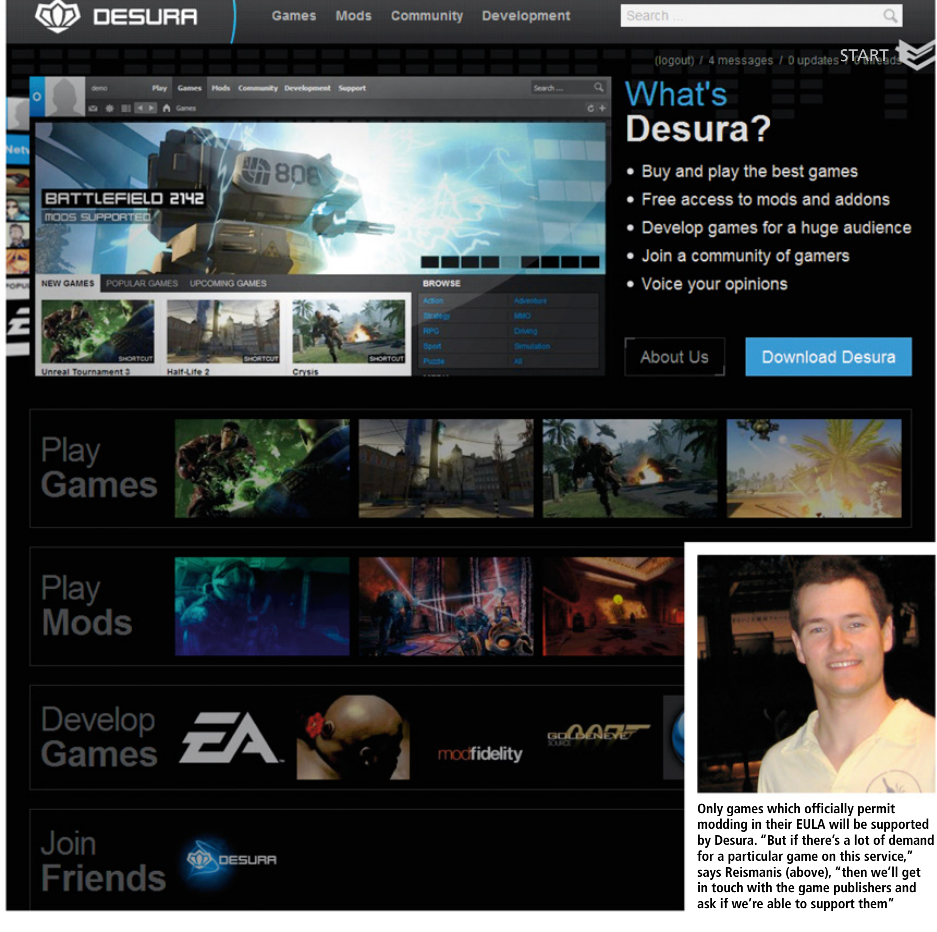
MODDING

Mod squad

New app Desura is more than just Steam for mods

Since it launched in 2002, ModDB's function has rapidly sprawled, evolving from a website which simply aggregates user-made add-ons to a lively development hub. Mod-teams are formed, ideas gestated and community feedback encouraged. But ModDB's founder **Scott Reismanis** hasn't stopped there: his new project is the standalone application Desura, which acts as a one stop shop for mods, indie games and big commercial titles.

"Mods are notoriously hard to find, install and manage," says Reismanis. "There's 6,000 mods on ModDB and there's no standard way of installing them. Every game has its own way of managing mods and every mod team has its own way of installing content. All that ModDB does is aggregate this content, but it's up to you to find it and install it. But say you have a game that's supported on Desura – any mod you have for that game is installed with a click of a button."



Only games which officially permit modding in their EULA will be supported by Desura. "But if there's a lot of demand for a particular game on this service," says Reismanis (above), "then we'll get in touch with the game publishers and ask if we're able to support them"

> **"Developers want to get feedback and start building their fanbase. They don't want to release the game and that's it; interaction with the community is very important"**

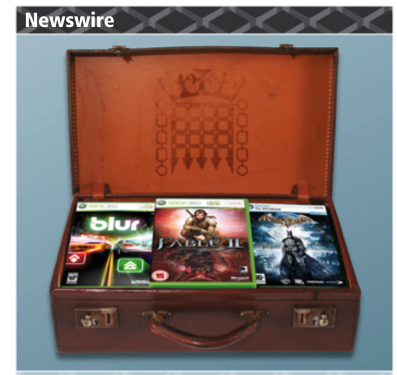
Comparisons with Steam are inevitable, and Reismanis is open about looking to Valve's digital distribution platform when building many of Desura's ancillary features, making achievements and stats available to its developers. But while there's considerable overlap between the two services, Desura's focus on the mod and indie community fills a hole in Steam's offering, and with the likes of jobs boards and in-built discussion forums, it hopes to offer bedroom coders more direct support.

"ModDB is a very community-friendly site," says Reismanis. "Everything on the site is controlled by the mod-makers and available for the community to comment on. If you look at other game download sites, they're essentially just a shop front and that's where the interactivity with the community ends. Desura is just like ModDB in that we build all the community functionality around the games. So when you download a mod you'll be able to review it, read other reviews, add comments, images and videos. The developers are in control of the content on their own pages, so they can post news images of their game pre and post release. It's pivotal for the developers: they want to get feedback and start building their fanbase. They don't want to just release the game and that's it; the interaction with the community is very important."

Desura only lists mods and indie games that have been released, or definitely scheduled for release. Nonetheless, it aims to be transparent in its selection process, and offer as much support as it can to mod makers, regardless of the status of their production. "We are allowing some content to go up before release, but there are caveats: it has to be pretty much guaranteed for a release within six months and have that release date set. We even produce tools for developers to run private betas using Desura, so the devs can select which users have access to their game," says Reismanis.

Building support for other add-ons, like skins, custom models and maps, is the next challenge. For now, Desura's team is focusing on support for a handful of games – intending to rapidly expand when the application comes out of private beta in April. But even with a small number of games and mods available at the time of writing, the interface is slick, the potential of its community features clearly pronounced. The question isn't whether Desura will catapult mods from being the reserve of the enthusiast to a much wider market – it's whether Reismanis will stop there.

Newswire



Vote for games?

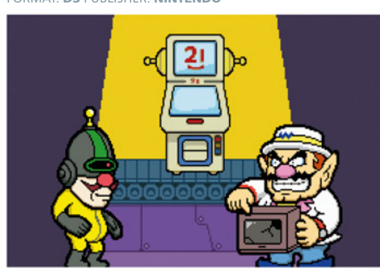
In the run-up to an election, miracles can happen. This year is no exception, as UK chancellor Alistair Darling recently confirmed tax breaks for the game industry. It's been a long time coming, with many claiming that the lack of such legislation – as seen in territories like Canada – has robbed the UK's representatives of talent and momentum.

The Games Tax Relief initially proposed by TIGA – the trade association representing the UK game industry – was welcomed by a variety of industry figures. Projects would need to pass an unspecified 'cultural test' to qualify, which in turn would provide a financial cushion to companies which make a loss on a venture and even entitle those which make a profit to reduced tax rates.

INCOMING

WarioWare: Do It Yourself

FORMAT: **DS** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**



Wario returns to the platform that serves his wonderful world best. As if nearly 100 new minigames weren't enough, you can now create your own reaction-traps to turn friends into foes

Lord Of The Rings: War In The North

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS**



Champions Of Norrath and *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* developer Snowblind is handling this 'mature' take on the property. Online co-op play is key, the action RPG visiting several "unseen lands"

Need For Speed World Online

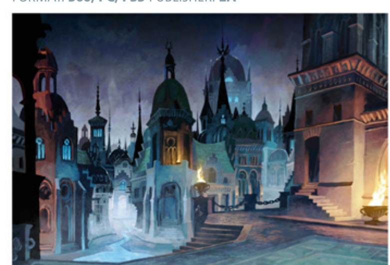
FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **EA**



Closed beta begins for EA's MMO racer (register at world.needforspeed.com), putting the power-ups, persistent stats, social connectivity and 150 miles of road through their paces

Project Mercury

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **EA**



38 Studios' reward for saving *Rise Of Nations* creator Big Huge Games: a publishing deal with EA for this "epic singleplayer RPG", part of its wider, previously unveiled Copernicus universe

Sam & Max: The Devil's Playhouse

FORMAT: **MAC, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **TELLTALE GAMES**



Having cleaned up 360 with Season Two, the Freelance Police head to the PS3 (and PC and Mac) for some new monthly episodes which see Max inherit ancient psychic powers

Puzzle Quest 2

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **TECMO**



Cramming the brains of fantasy RPGs and match-three puzzlers into a blender made for an irresistible handheld delight the first time. The new minigame ingredient should provide an added kick

SOCOM 4: US Navy SEALs

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCE**



Don't expect a reload of *MAG*, Zipper promising a six-day, two-act story introducing the series' first female protagonist. Artificial intelligence is the focus in this "more accessible" sequel

True Crime

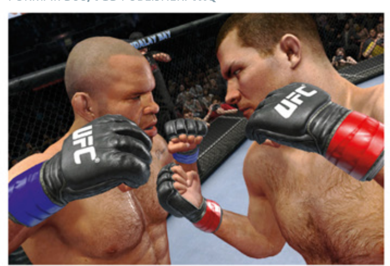
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**



Like *Stranglehold*? *Rise To Honor*? The original *Streets Of LA*? Fans of that triad should relish United Front's free-running reboot, its open world straddling Hong Kong's rich-poor divide

UFC Undisputed 2010

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **THQ**



Addressing two of our complaints from 2009, the posture system and lack of Greco-Roman wrestling, the new game adds a *Fight Night*-style swaying and a southpaw stance for its 100+ fighters

INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

The Company Of Myself

tinyurl.com/tcomyself

I instantly notice how similar this room looks to the previous one, and almost feel cheated until I realize that my previous tactic will not work again.

Time loops might be de rigeur of late, but this is one you won't want to erase and rewind. You take control of a self-confessed 'hermit,' a loner journeying across the 2D plane in search of meaning. The expositional text doubles as a tutorial and hint system, welcoming you into the weird and wonderful world of timed jumps and replays. The closest visual ancestor is *Lemmings*, and your protagonist is a suitably diminutive wanderer, working with the shadows of his previous lives: using them as transports, platforms and, ironically, friends.

The simple controls – arrow keys to move, space to be born again – pave the way for the bright and breezy levels. A brain-freezing hurdle comes in the form of force fields, some of which can be bypassed only by your shadows.

It's the subtlety of *The Company Of Myself* that stays long in the memory. The chiming score and user-friendly design – flowers for start points, boxes for exits – cushion rather than crowd your thoughts, allowing you take in the poetic sense of place the dev team are keen to imbue.



In association with Screen Digest

The economics of motion control

Piers Harding-Rolls examines some of the tough questions facing publishers over Move and Natal

As we know, the end of 2010 will see the console market awash with marketing and content for Microsoft's Natal and Sony's Move motion control solutions. The platform holders hope these new control schemes will expand the audience for games on their platforms, allowing them to compete more directly with Nintendo's Wii and even help them elongate the lifecycle of their devices, a more immediate issue for the 360 having been on the market for over a year longer than its rivals. These ambitions are certainly positive to publishers, which are always on the look out for ways to squeeze more return from investments in tools and software technology.

While there are a number of straightforward positives around motion control for publishers, the commercial implication of supporting new technology at this stage in the cycle is actually highly disruptive to publishers' normal business planning, and therefore presents a fairly complex commercial backdrop for many companies. On top of this general planning disruption, support for each specific type of motion control technology has its own commercial implications for publishers as the differences in the technology fragment the addressable markets across the consoles yet further.

Let's first set the scene. At this stage of the console lifecycle, publishers would normally have expected to have made most of their significant investments in software tools and technology. They will now be looking to squeeze as much return from these investments as possible, by re-using technology and assets in multiple games and sequels to help generate more profit margins on the future sales of games. This is also reflected in the slowdown in the introduction of new and original intellectual property at this stage of the cycle. Content will be increasingly characterised by sequels to existing franchises, many of which will have already had at least one release during the current generation of consoles.

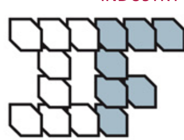
At this stage it will be very hard to convince a third party to invest massively in Natal under these commercial conditions, unless there is a specific large financial incentive to do so

While this reflects the normal publisher investment cycle, the massive increase in costs of making content for the high definition platforms and the general economic turmoil across major games markets has put this business model under increasing pressure. As a result, publishers have been driven to become more risk averse than ever, and to curb any new investments even earlier in the cycle.

This commercial backdrop describes the difficult financial environment publishers are operating within when making decisions about which motion control technology to support and to what extent. The fact is many publishers will not be seeking to make large bets on new technology at this stage. Of the two technologies, Natal represents the biggest move away from existing controllers and content. The move to an entirely controller-free environment necessitates the creation of

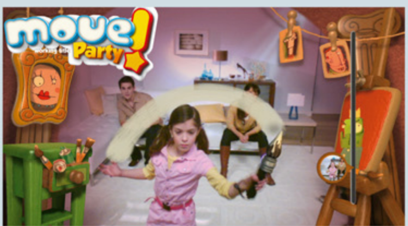


The MotionPlus add-on introduced the second generation of Wii gaming with *Wii Sports Resort*. With Move and Natal arriving, how will Nintendo respond?







The vision for Natal includes various activities, but its actual game lineup remains unknown. Minigame collections, meanwhile, are likely to feature heavily among both Natal and Move releases

completely new content and will need substantial investment from publishers to develop new games. Without a guaranteed return on this investment – publishers have no exact idea of how many Natal-enabled consoles will be active towards the end of 2010 – it is likely that many games from third parties will be fairly limited in scope at the launch stage. Expect party game compilations and sports titles that copy many of the early games released on the Wii. At this stage it will be very hard to convince a third party to invest massively in Natal under these commercial conditions, unless there is a specific large financial incentive to do so. This is reflected in Microsoft's strong courting of the publishing community since the beginning of 2009 – the company has needed to work hard to build support for the technology.

Sony's Move technology is less of a departure in interface terms from the Wii. As such, Move offers many publishers a quicker and cheaper route to market than Natal. However, this is likely to have a knock-on effect on innovation and originality of content. Publishers will understandably be seeking to port existing games from the Wii or to add motion control features to existing franchises. Again, without an accurate understanding of exactly how many Move-enabled PS3s will be active in the market, it is hard for publishers to make big bets on the technology at launch. As a result I expect thirdparty Move content to play safe and to be fairly basic in design.

All this underlines the importance firstparty studios will have in driving adoption of this new



technology. Without a large addressable market, thirdparty publishers will avoid investing large amounts, so firstparty content will play a central role in generating interest and buzz in the platforms by introducing games that are more risky in terms of both gameplay and scale of ambition. And this leads us on to comparing the firstparty capability of both Microsoft and Sony. Sony has substantially more internal development capability than Microsoft and this may yet prove to be a significant competitive advantage with regard to driving forward each company's motion control ambitions.



SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

The black ships of Master Chief

Christophe Kagotani asks if western might will force open Japan's game dev borders



While it was the Portuguese who first put Europe on the map for the Japanese, it was Commodore Matthew Perry's steaming black ships in the mid 19th century that catapulted our nation from middles ages to modernity. It was the military might which came with those ships that made Japan realise it was in no position to oppose a modern western power. The empire capitulated to the demands for a trade agreement, opening up its ports – previously only accessible to Dutch and Chinese navies. It was a wake-up call which initiated an intensive policy of technological update.

The impact of the black ships is still seen as a major turning point in Japanese history, breaking a long period of isolationism. Perry is still a prominent figure in cultural discourse today – even appearing in TV ads. But the renovation of Japan did not come without human cost – the leap forward was, if anything, dwarfed by the accompanying culture shock and domestic resistance. It's a pattern that has repeated itself in more recent times, as western dominance has compelled change within stagnating domestic industries. As I sat down in front of Halo Legends – a collection of seven short animated films commissioned from Japanese studios – it occurred to me that this was a good example. It demonstrates the current weakness of the animation industry, but also how studios can deliver high quality when adequately funded and produced – the kicker being that it took an overseas initiative to unlock this creativity.

With Toyota taking a beating overseas, the Japanese media is keen to show that the country is still doing well abroad; lately the animation and manga industries have been paraded as our most successful exports

"If your creation is a hit, you're asked to do twice as well for half the budget next time." This is what I'm told by a friend of mine – a character and mech designer who works on major games and anime. He's not the only one to say this. It seems the funding isn't there for domestic Japanese products.

He adds: "We have to sacrifice our pride by incorporating product placement. We prefer to give up on quality so we have enough resources to, at least, deliver the story in full. Or we just accept working on the usual few franchises that have been repeating themselves over and over again for decades."

Putting Studio Ghibli's output to one side, Akira may have been among the very last major animated movies. Productions today feel small-scale and niche. The lack of financial support means that much of the animation and CG work has to be outsourced to China and south east Asia. Of course, when it concerns a popular franchise like Gundam, you get more than enough resources – but even Gundam has never seen global renown. Sometimes I feel like our entire entertainment industry is falling victim to Galapagos Syndrome.

Yet with Toyota taking a beating overseas, the Japanese media is keen to show that the country is still doing well abroad; lately the animation and manga industries have been paraded as our most successful exports. And whenever the news shows

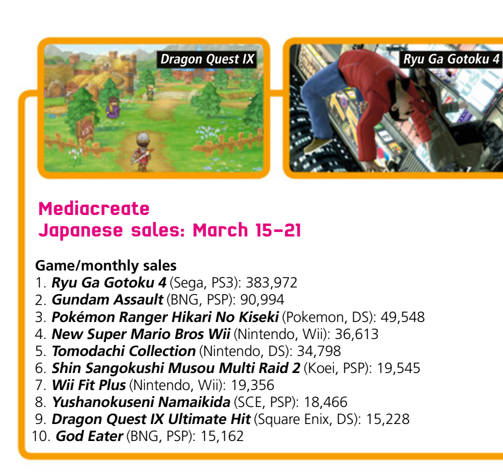
Would Japanese animation studios have been able to produce something as ambitious as Halo Legends (left) without the financial heft of a popular western franchise? And would we really want that sort of western sponsorship directed at flagging Japanese videogame developers?

Japanese girls and western cosplayers at some event abroad, my phone rings. Often these events happen in Paris and since I'm half French and half Japanese, people like to tease me. Recently it was a videogame producer who phoned.

"Hey, are you watching this?" he asked. "Man, niche otaku culture is our new hope!" I don't know if I have to feel sorry for France, Japan or both. But he might be right. Halo Legends suggests that there is still creativity and talent in the industry, desperate for the chance to deliver. *Halo*, and The Matrix before it, gave them that opportunity – but will the future of Japan's animation be forever tethered to the arrival of black ships in its harbour? I hope that, seeing these projects, the industry will realise that it's now, more than ever, that we must take our own products to the world.

What could the black ships do for our videogame industry? It's hard to see a western company sponsoring Japanese-flavoured twists on its own existing franchises. Can you really imagine *Halo Quest* or *Super Reach Fighter Turbo*? *Covenant Hunter* is about as plausible as they get. And compared to the animation industry, where the arrival of new technologies like DVD made its product more affordable and accessible to the public, Japanese videogame development has had to contend with spiralling development costs and a diminished high-spec gaming audience – almost killed outright by the high price of the PS3.

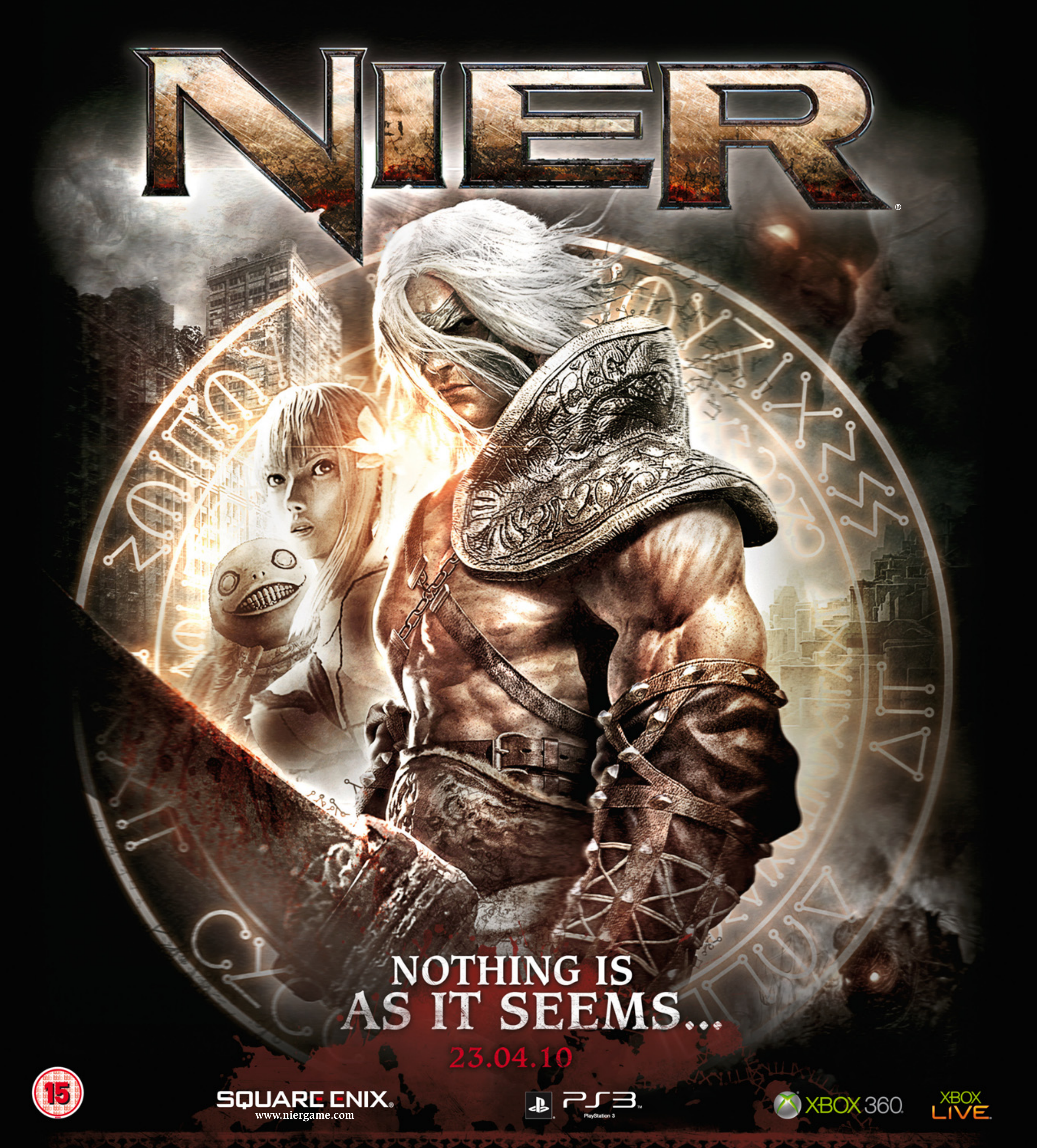
So, what is left for the American commodore in the empire of the rising sun? Matthew Perry needed Japanese ports to replenish the coal for the steam engines of US ships and to open trade with the Far East. Perhaps the same applies now – rather than looking at Japan as just a market, it could make sense for the west to approach it as a resource of skill and talent to improve and refine western developments destined for further inland, China and Korea. Hopefully, if western sponsorship brings a little bit of confidence back to the industry here, it will debunk the myth that Japan can no longer make its own games for a global market. Hopefully, the black ships will sail back, laden with Japanese exports – animation and games that no longer need to piggyback on the popularity of western franchises. Although now that I come to think about it, *Orbital Drop Storm Gear* could almost work.



Mediacreate Japanese sales: March 15-21

Game/monthly sales

1. ***Ryu Ga Gotoku 4*** (Sega, PS3): 383,972
2. ***Gundam Assault*** (BNG, PSP): 90,994
3. ***Pokémon Ranger Hikari No Kiseki*** (Pokemon, DS): 49,548
4. ***New Super Mario Bros Wii*** (Nintendo, Wii): 36,613
5. ***Tomodachi Collection*** (Nintendo, DS): 34,798
6. ***Shin Sangokushi Musou Multi Raid 2*** (Koei, PSP): 19,545
7. ***Wii Fit Plus*** (Nintendo, Wii): 19,356
8. ***Yushanokuseni Namaikida*** (SCE, PSP): 18,466
9. ***Dragon Quest IX Ultimate Hit*** (Square Enix, DS): 15,228
10. ***God Eater*** (BNG, PSP): 15,162

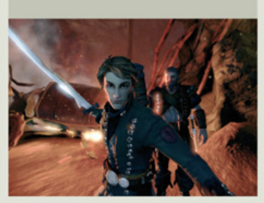

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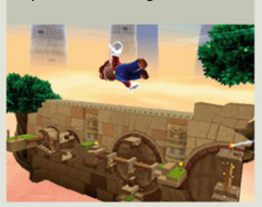
Edge's most wanted

Fable III



We've saved Albion twice, and now we're being put in charge to sort things out properly. We'll be a benevolent dictator, but don't cross us, or we might let one go.
360, MICROSOFT

Super Mario Galaxy 2



Sitting at our desks with the first game's Gusty Gardens theme music swirling around in our minds can only go so far towards easing this particular wait.
WII, NINTENDO

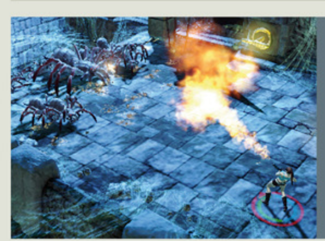
Crysis 2



Finishing our trilogy of sequels, this looked every frame a stone-cold killer on PS3 and 360 at GDC. It appears no one gets more mileage from a processor than Crytek.
360, PC, PS3, EA

Image manipulation

Charting the changing art of Lara craft



Once one of the brightest stars in gaming's firmament, *Tomb Raider*'s Lara Croft has constantly struggled to reinvent herself with each generation. But how are her changes in fortunes linked to changes in her face and form?

With her first movie, Lara Croft marched into households which had never been graced by a console. It made $274,703,340 worldwide. This is the biggest of all Lara's problems.

Even while Angelina Jolie's first outing as Croft topped the movie charts, the success of the character as a videogame heroine was fading, her PlayStation swansong *Chronicles* receiving mixed reviews and underwhelming sales the previous year. By 2003, it was the game that was taking orders from the film, with *Angel Of Darkness* rushed to shelves before la Jolie appeared onscreen in Cradle Of Life. Both film and game did comparatively poorly.

Recent attempts to revive her have taken Lara back to her roots, remaking her early successes, trying to tease out what made them great and later games ghastly. But while Eidos has once again found sure footing with the back-to-basics *Underworld*, the question of where to go next has been a trickier one. *Uncharted*, meanwhile, seems to have scampered on past with ease, kicking scree in the face of hapless Lara below.

But the truth is that, contrary to what marketing people might tell you about the power of brands, it's sometimes far easier to make anew than it is to make again. Lara Croft, with her fantastical polygonal bust, is an artefact of an era long since past – bringing that Lara into high fidelity turns her from a necessary graphical abstraction into a cartoon.

The meaning changes, as does the appeal. Yet, overshadowed by the successes of the past, Lara is shackled to a former identity, and changes to it, be they visual or in the genre of the game itself, are viewed though the distorting and most often rose-tinted lens of nostalgia.

Eidos has chosen to manage the weight of expectations by breaking the character and genre apart. While a bigger *Tomb Raider*-branded game is in the works, Lara Croft is trying to make it on her own in a downloadable action title, with a new perspective and a co-op buddy. New owner Square Enix must be interested in how Eidos's star property performs outside of her comfort zone. But, now superseded in the genre that she popularised, you have to wonder if it was ever really Lara that people loved, or simply the game she was in.











FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **EDEN GAMES**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **2010**

Test Drive Unlimited 2

Eden's sequel goes large in Ibiza, though nightlife remains scarce

It speaks volumes of *Test Drive Unlimited* that its handling, even in its sequel, only comes together at the end. Playing the first game as it veered through development meant learning it anew every time, the balance of arcade and sim changing with every public build. And as we sit in Eden's new studio – part of a Namco Bandai complex still furnished, amusingly, with Infogrames carpets – we're not even given that luxury. Doubtless fearing an errant shot from a cowboy journalist or two, the studio's keeping its new game's handling strictly hands-off.

You have to sympathise. If handling and physics are the core jigsaw pieces to any driving game, then finding ones that sit comfortably in *TDU*'s overall picture is hard. You want your players to feel the prestige of driving a real Bugatti Veyron around the new game's island, Ibiza, but not to the point where they wipe out on the first bend and take a ten-minute detour to the nearest bodyshop. They have to be awed but not overwhelmed, challenged yet pampered.

This might not be the world's only MMO racer any more – *Need For Speed World Online*, for one, has just entered closed beta – but it's still the most luxurious.

To look at them, then, the new game's physics seem largely unchanged from the original *TDU*'s. An ill-advised high-speed, head-on collision with a lamppost sees our demonstrator's car pinball back into the road with little apparent injury: just a few kinks and some eye-watering scars to the paintwork. Given that *TDU2*'s cars feature a gorgeous metal flake effect sandwiched between two layers of paint (all of which are customisable) maybe that's the idea. Vanity is *TDU*'s foremost currency, and this game hits you where it hurts.

Eden insists it's still early days for the handling, but that the goal is a greater simulation feel with real-world assists for arcade fans, and clear distinctions between price ranges and drivetrains. Keeping bikes back for future DLC, it's filling the void with something better suited to Iberian terrain: off-road 4x4s. Some two and a half times bigger than the first game's home of Oahu, Hawaii, this topologically correct island is full of treasures for hardy explorers. Stumble across a wrecked exclusive car and it'll be transferred to your garage, the exploration itself adding points to your online profile.

Taking cues from another open-world racer, *Burnout Paradise*, *TDU2* rewards you for simply playing it as intended. The new persistent stats system keeps five scores: Competition, Social, Discovery, Collection and Global – which pretty much sum the

Some two and a half times bigger than the first game's home of Oahu, Hawaii, the new topologically-correct island of Ibiza is full of treasures for hardy explorers



Scene it

Life in the original *TDU* feels just as you'd expect of an Oahu plagued by idiots in indestructible supercars: absent. Similar at a glance, the sequel's Ibiza bears a little more activity, or at least the occasional flock of birds. Emergent details should abound, though, thanks to the full light and shadow system attached to the new day/night cycle, not to mention weather that swings between tropical sunshine and violent thunderstorms. Leave your convertible's roof down and the latter might dampen the seats and dashboard, textured here to the finest stitch in the upholstery. So, in the absence of photo mode details, at least there's plenty of subject matter.



Cars this time include the Dodge Charger and Viper, four models of the outgoing Pagani Zonda, the McLaren MP4-12C, Spyker C8, C12, and two Mercedes SLRs. A paranoid NDA prevents further reveals, but fans of the *TDU* Megapack will not be disappointed



TDU's traffic AI wasn't half the problem suggested by some, but Eden's promising improvements. No word yet on network code











Off-road driving will muddy your bodywork, a brief spell of rain enough to wash it off again. Then it's up to the sun to gradually dry things to normality



game up. This is a much broader MMOG than last time, especially when it comes to life outside the car.

TDU fans will recall the frustrations of customising the first game's avatars: finding they still looked basically the same, wore clothes defined more by logos than designs, and moved via cutscene between cars, showrooms and sofas. Put simply, they belonged more to the game and its sponsors than to you. While still adopting a walled-garden approach to foot travel, *TDU2* achieves a much greater sense of control, letting you freely wander about its cars and venues, filling in the blanks in your character's routine.

This creates all kinds of opportunities for social play, none of which have passed Eden by. Most interesting by far is a new co-op passenger feature, whereby an online buddy can join you in the cockpit for browsing, matchmaking, exploring or racing. More ominous is the jacuzzi, where that same character can join you amid the bubbles on, in this case, your own private yacht. Up to 32 avatars can mingle in any one location, begging the question of just what kind of Ibiza the game plans to make.

While a new 24-hour time-of-day cycle makes nightlife an option in *TDU2*, how Eden hopes to capture the spirit – or spirits – of Ibiza's port districts is unknown. It seems more concerned with the extremities of the island's weather. With avatars confined to their own instanced locations, this is an open world largely free of pedestrians and scenes commonly shown on 'Brits abroad' TV shows. That means no Primark princesses in foetal positions, no knights in shining Ben Sherman shirts to save them.

This, like Oahu, is a playground for a different kind of hedonist, the Gumballer. *TDU2* hopes to close the gap between road trip and race to little more than a button press, suggesting a spontaneity closer to games like *Tokyo Highway Battle*. The only clubs of note are car clubs, the game's clans: with their war chests ready for tournament battles and spontaneous showdowns, they resemble *Eve Online* corporations. Personal wealth is more precious now, and there's much talk of "gambling" in today's presentation.

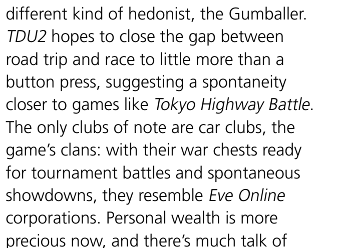
There's heavy emphasis on DLC, too, which Eden has "massive" plans for. Aware that its support for the first game was short-lived, it's straining towards a more organic MMOG model of ongoing development, sure to cause even more headaches with day-one reviews. The breadth of its social aspirations is a secret, implying anything from Facebook support to career tracking via the web. But it's not *The Sims*, we're assured, so don't expect to be throwing shapes at Es Paradis.



If it wasn't broke, Eden isn't fixing it. The realtime map is largely unchanged, sweeping up from the road to a position among the clouds. From here, you can appreciate Ibiza's seldom-advertised diversity









Upgrades to a clan clubhouse bring garages and, in some cases, an exclusive prestige car like the Gumpert Apollo Sport. Only one member can drive it at a time, affirming its value as a status symbol

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **2K CZECH**
ORIGIN: **CZECH REPUBLIC**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E190, E202, E207**

Mafia II

We finally get hands-on in 2K Czech's world of cannoli, crooks and concrete shoes





Although there's little dalliance with the usual open-world frivolities, the game's stats page suggests there are collectible Playboy magazines. There's also a stat for the time you spend inspecting them

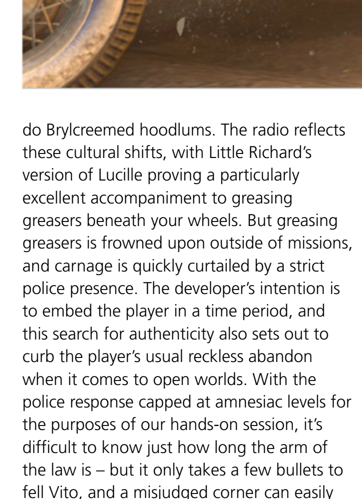
In the contested turf of the open world, the biggest battle Take Two has this autumn is with itself, being the parent company of both 2K Games, publisher of *Mafia II*, and Rockstar, publisher of *LA Noire*. It's hard to see how the two '40s crime thrillers will avoid stepping on each other's polished brogues. The technologically dazzling *LA Noire* promises a game of cerebral detection which embraces the openness and dynamism of its city in potentially groundbreaking ways – and it's only next to these grandiose ambitions that *Mafia II* looks a little staid, with its decision to go for a linear, cinematic game, juggling gunplay and action against an open-world backdrop. But this comparative modesty has its virtues – *Mafia II*'s action and environments are realised with a hard-won class. Combat may not have the bells and whistles of other cover shooters, but instead it offers rarer features: precise control over the mechanics, a flow of battle that deftly balances vulnerability with power and a sense of brutal heft to each bullet. Similarly, *Mafia II* may not dally with dialogue trees, but its epic crime narrative is literate and well-voiced, sweeping the player through a decade of life in Empire Bay as war veteran turned Mafioso Vito Scaletta.

The charms of this fiction are difficult to assess in snippets, but Empire Bay itself is a place saturated with detail – a smaller and more tightly-controlled space than other open worlds which permits the developers to lavish attention on its every pavement, awning and façade. Weather conditions and time of day are determined by the mission, giving each a unique flavour, and scripted events are slickly seeded into the world, filling it with character and life, rather than a series of dynamic systems locked in cold interaction. As Vito returns home from the war, weighed down with bags, a nearby fellow skids on the icy pavement then rights himself; the camera tilts as a plane flies low over the roofs of Little Italy.

> Combat offers precise control over the mechanics, a flow of battle that deftly balances vulnerability with power and a sense of brutal heft to each bullet

Such attention extends to the changing fashions in dress, music and vehicles as the game progresses. Rock'n'roll arrives, and so do Brylcreemed hoodlums. The radio reflects these cultural shifts, with Little Richard's version of Lucille proving a particularly excellent accompaniment to greasing greasers beneath your wheels. But greasing greasers is frowned upon outside of missions, and carnage is quickly curtailed by a strict police presence. The developer's intention is to embed the player in a time period, and this search for authenticity also sets out to curb the player's usual reckless abandon when it comes to open worlds. With the police response capped at amnesiac levels for the purposes of our hands-on session, it's difficult to know just how long the arm of the law is – but it only takes a few bullets to fell Vito, and a misjudged corner can easily bring a crime spree to a nasty full stop.

Scrapping with the fuzz isn't the point of the game, according to 2K, and opportunities for senseless violence are limited – but we give it a good go all the same. Having plugged a few café patrons, we get a chance to test out the line-of-sight pursuit system that forces you to look for places to go to ground or double back. The cops give you a chance to hand yourself in: if one gets too close, you automatically sink to your knees with your hands on your head, a





The level of detail in the world staggers – particularly with its interiors – although we wonder whether it was worthwhile to create working taps and light switches where no lighting changes are required









The rules of the road must be obeyed to a degree – rocket past a cop at 80mph and he will attempt to arrest you. As in the first game there's a speed limiter you can enable to stop yourself zipping past the limit unawares



Police comms keep you updated as to the nature of your transgression and the force with which it shall be met. Shoot a cop, and you'll hear the police operator authorise the use of deadly force to put you down

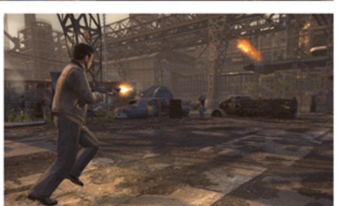
timer ticking down while you decide whether to bribe the officer or resist arrest.

But if 2K successfully dissuades the player from toying with the police unnecessarily, then there's still plenty of opportunity for dramatic violence on a mission. The game cherry picks incidents from across the ten years during which the game is set, so it's able to simultaneously insist that a gangster's life is not wall-to-wall bloodshed while exposing the player to only the most pyrotechnic of events. The mission we play is a trimmed version of one that will appear in-game – an even mix of arson, gunplay and driving that doesn't wow with novelty, but assures with polished execution. Vito's bootleg cigarette business turns into a literal fire sale when some local greasers choose to toast the merchandise with a Molotov. The man who bankrolls our operation demands revenge and we repay the greasers in kind, shooting up their favourite bar before setting it alight. The sequence shows off the environmental damage – the world generally offers less opportunity for destruction, but here, within this controlled instance, the wooden frontage splinters, glass shatters, and the sign swings down to hang at a sad angle before being consumed by flames.

We then head over to the foundry where the greasers hang out to emphasise our displeasure with baseball bats – a plan that quickly comes apart when the hoods pull out guns. We're not alone in the firefight that ensues – Vito's ever-present buddy Joe has our back, and our employer has supplied a number of other thugs to balance the odds. They're a useful bunch, and the battle, which sweeps through the foundry in a strictly controlled route, manages to disguise the fact that we are the main impetus for its advance. Vito is suitably fragile, relying on the now well-worn conventions of the cover-shooter, a system which here trims away additions like blind-fire to reveal a spartan but exact core. It usually takes only two taps to put an enemy down, but this is weighed against an unpredictable level of accuracy; automatic weapons are thus suitably devastating, able to fill the air with bullets.

Mafia II looks to be a supremely solid construction, and when so many games of a similar scale struggle to corral their ambition, 2K's tight execution of basic action is encouraging. The story that it is able to build on top of this foundation could yet elevate it to greatness among its open world peers – but even as it stands, *Mafia II*'s essential competence and meticulous period reconstruction should make it a very welcome addition to the family.







We haven't spent enough time criss-crossing Empire Bay to know if sticking to 40mph will feel like a chore. Thankfully, the small size of the playable area at least means the journeys are rarely epic in length, and there's always the radio to keep you company



Suspension and disbelief

An oft-cited bugbear about the original *Mafia* was the realism of its car handling, turning each journey into a gruelling simulation of period-accurate creaky cornering and apathetic acceleration. *Mafia II* has the benefit of moving forward a decade in automotive design, but still takes plenty of liberties with the physics to ensure a smoother, more responsive ride. In fact, the cars handle with more ease than *GTAIV*'s wonderfully temperamental vehicles.

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA SOFTWORKS**
DEVELOPER: **OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2010**

Fallout: New Vegas

A blast from the past takes us back to the irradiated wasteland







Weapon modification is certainly welcome, but occasionally your armaments will be potent enough. The grenade machine-gun is exactly that, a cannon that thumps out grenades at an alarming rate

While Bethesda claims it was nothing but serendipity, it's fitting that competent sequel ringer Obsidian Entertainment was drafted in for this follow-up-cum-spinoff to the enormously successful *Fallout 3*. Aside from making a name from capable continuations of BioWare's epic RPG sagas, Obsidian itself was born from the ashes of Black Isle, founded by designers and producers who had been leading lights on the original *Fallout* series, not to mention *Planescape: Torment* and *Icewind Dale*. The lingering sense of unfinished business is only heightened with the knowledge that key members of Obsidian, including Chris Avellone and JE Sawyer, were working on a third *Fallout* game, codenamed Van Buren, at the point when Interplay began to fatally contract.

With a new developer at the helm, one with a history with the series that stretches beyond Bethesda's involvement, and with the lack of a numeral in the title, it would be reasonable to expect that *Fallout New Vegas* would bear an identifying mark – a difference in tone, aesthetic or mechanics that makes it recognisably the product of its pedigree. Instead, *New Vegas* adheres extremely closely to the language established in *Fallout 3*, much of which was inherited from *Oblivion* prior to that. The decision has grounding in good financial sense, but for some, particularly those who vehemently and vociferously opposed the release of *Fallout 3*, the increasingly aged visuals, wooden NPCs and all-pervasive familiarity will immediately dampen enthusiasm about the reunion.

That's not to say there won't be trace elements that hark back to Black Isle's previous work. *New Vegas* marks a return to the west coast of the US and the revival of several factions, including the New Californian Republic, that were influential in the first two editions. Interaction between these factions is the biggest change to the world, with options for massaging the sociological landscape vastly more sophisticated than in *Fallout 3* and the status of those relationships exposed in the returning Pip Boy 3000 interface. Behaviour that raises the ire of one group may well endear you to another, but only if your actions are observed – it will be possible to employ Machiavellian puppetry from afar to bend the wasteland's inhabitants to your will and, in many cases, cause them to suspect each other of foul play. Karma, by contrast, is inescapable – while your ideological allegiances will not be judged, and may well be woolly enough to be considered equally ethically valid, there is still a clearly-defined moral seam that runs throughout the game.

Unlike *Fallout 3*, your character isn't quite a blank slate, and you won't have the same opportunity to shape their outlook from birth. At the beginning of the game, you're placed in the weathered boots of a wasteland courier, who has been shot twice in the head and left in a shallow grave in the Mojave desert. Rescued by a mysterious robot and suffering from amnesia, the story proper starts in a sun-bleached and sand-blasted prospector town called Good Springs. In spite of this, you will have the opportunity to tweak how your character looks and plays



The Nightkin strain of supermutant harks back to the original *Fallout* titles, and you'll usually only ever see them this close up. At distance they are cloaked by Stealth Boys, the abuse of which has gradually driven them mad





Rather than forge its own path as far as character models are concerned, the aesthetic remains almost identical to that of *Fallout 3*. Long-time fans of the ex-Black Isle team will be hoping the script has seen more radical changes





through an interview with the settlement's resident physician, Doc Mitchell. As before, skills can be manually assigned should the resulting profile displease you. Endure this relatively short period of character calibration and you're left to your own devices in an environment of comparable size to the DC wasteland. Depriving first timers of a lengthy prologue may leave them with more questions than answers, but for seasoned survivors the offer of freedom within moments of launching the game is likely to be a welcome one.

While the golf club, and its associated 'Fore!' attack, is the only new melee weapon to be revealed so far, Obsidian is promising a variety of tools for clubbing enemies to death, each with their own unique attacks

It will be possible to employ Machiavellian puppetry from afar to bend the wasteland's inhabitants to your will and, in many cases, cause them to suspect each other of foul play

After the obligatory reveal as you emerge from the clinic, which is a carbon copy of the ocular adjustment and dramatically swelling score from *Fallout 3*, it becomes apparent that while the action has been relocated and the fiction pitches Mojave as far less ravaged than DC, one wasteland looks much like another. The Vegas strip has yet to be revealed, and in spite of its disrepair deserves to be as vibrant as the engine can muster, but out in the desert the standard palette of rust browns and gunmetal greys is as prevalent as ever.

But while the colour scheme is depressingly familiar, there are new locations that should pique the interest. One such area is Helios One, a concentrated solar power station that is initially controlled by the New Californian Republic. Depending on your relationship with the faction, it's possible to coerce the guards into allowing you to explore the facility. The plant is entrusted to a vacant gentleman called Fantastic, an unashamed facsimile of Christian Slater who has yet to discover how to bring the facility back online. Depending on your selection of skills, some of which will offer new dialogue choices that are more persuasive than the standard options, you are able to assume control of Helios One, route electricity to regions of your choice – including the strip itself – and utilise the potent Archimedes II orbital laser to incinerate the remaining NCR guards. While it lacks the impact of Megaton's destruction it does, at the very least, shares similar scale.

The return of key designers such as Avellone and Sawyer to the position of caretakers of the *Fallout* universe is certainly intriguing for those familiar with the original titles, and there will no doubt be thematic parallels, and perhaps even characters shared, between *New Vegas*' plot and the cancelled Van Buren project. Many players who joined the series only after Bethesda's refresh will likely be happy to be presented with a near seamless continuation of that experience but, crucially, it's clear that the engine has been left to stagnate – with two years between *Fallout 3*'s arrival and the release of *New Vegas*, jarring foibles such as stilted animation and robotic scripting are likely to be even harder to forgive. It is plausible that the team's unrivalled affection for and knowledge of the *Fallout* universe will result in a narrative that elevates the game beyond its technical deficiencies. At this early stage, though, with Obsidian's priorities apparently laying with content, we suspect that the overt and transparent similarity between the two titles signifies that many criticisms of *Fallout 3* will remain unaddressed.

Survive and thrive

While *Fallout 3*'s fauna was a persistent threat, the environment itself never proved as hostile as a nuclear wasteland should. In *New Vegas* an optional 'hardcore' mode, distinct from difficulty settings, makes subsistence in the Mojave a considerably more challenging affair. Maintaining hydration while wandering the scorched desert will be your primary concern during exploration, and Stimpaks will no longer provide instantaneous relief from injury nor heal broken limbs. A final inconvenience is the addition of ammo weight, meaning that a well-armed traveller will find inventory space all the scarcer. While the option to revert to a more inert environment is available at any point, there will of course be an Achievement to reward survivalists.



While your character is not a vault dweller, the plot contrives to give you the iconic jumpsuit and Pip Boy almost immediately. As before, there are conversation and movement bonuses depending on choice of outfit



Exploration will be rewarded with access to alternative routes, puzzles and extra chunks of story info. In the demo, successfully opening a hidden room led to the release of the prisoner inside



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA SOFTWORKS**
DEVELOPER: **INXILE ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Hunted: The Demon's Forge

Is it GOW, WOW or simply D&D with even more T&A?

According to InXile CEO Brian Fargo, *Hunted: The Demon's Forge*, a co-op-focused action title, is an attempt to apply today's technology to the dungeon crawler of old. It's a bolder statement of intent than it looks. *Hunted*'s dark fantasy stylings, with its slathering orc-likes, the Wargar, and scantily clad heroine, shouldn't be too much of a culture shock for today's gamers. If they are, the game's interweaving of less familiar aspects with more recognisable mechanics should ease any transition which needs to be made.

Hunted's protagonists, Elara and Caddoc, are each capable of ranged, melee and magical attacks, but not equally so. Elara's more proficient with a bow than Caddoc, who prefers hitting things standing right in front of him. Players are expected to take advantage of their own strengths while covering their ally's weakness.

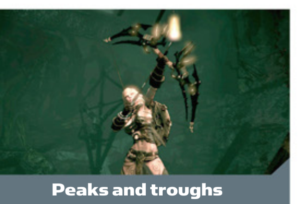
In the example we're shown the pair, rounding a corner in the Unreal-rendered caverns beneath the burned-out town of Dyfed, only to be confronted by a pack of Wargar. Elara dives into cover before popping out, *Gears Of War* style, to take shots at the attackers. Caddoc, by contrast, has pushed ahead, creating a bottleneck of carnage as the Wargar are funnelled toward his blade. *Hunted*'s internal codename was allegedly Gears Of Warcraft, and if Elara's cover-based shooting brought to mind *Gears*, then here we see the *Warcraft* – the tactics bring to mind the class distinctions of Blizzard's title rather than the identikit roles seen in your average co-op shooter.

Hunted's core conceit is 'co-op at a distance'. Levels will feature a multi-tier structure allowing Elara to cover Caddoc at range and, to this end, downed players can be resurrected from great distances too. The ease of doing this will be offset by a limited supply of the resurrection potions found scattered about the levels.

This distance philosophy is reflected in the game's magic system. While spells can be used offensively, the game's 'battle charge' system sees Caddoc and Elara temporarily buffing each other with magical effects. These can be as simple as charging each other's weapon with an elemental spell (allowing greater damage against certain enemies) or, more interestingly, temporarily offsetting a character's weakness – if Elara finds herself surrounded, a quick battle charge on her sword should even the odds for a short time.

Despite promises to ensure that the singleplayer experience remains as rich as online play, co-op clearly lies at the heart of the game, which is perhaps why InXile has developed a partner-finding system aimed at minimising the hassle of playing with strangers. Players will be able to specify which character they prefer, how far along in the game they are, and their preferred play style in an online portal which, developed after much time spent studying dating websites, is affectionately referred to as 'Single White Barbarian' by the dev team.

Despite the lack of a GSOH, *Hunted* might yet have a chance of pulling an old genre into the present. There's nothing archaic here, but what could be a slick action game with a helping of tactical depth amid the guts and gore.



Peaks and troughs

We're promised simmering sexual tension between *Hunted*'s leads over the course of the game. This shouldn't come as much of a surprise considering the fact that Elara has clearly subscribed to the 'less is more' school of battle dress, and has the odd habit of standing, when idle, at an angle which shows as much of her assets as possible without causing spinal injury. If this wasn't enough, one moment in the demo saw the pair shimmying along a ledge over a 1,000-foot drop. As Elara pressed her back to the wall, the camera moved above her head and pointed down, giving everyone present a good look down into the gulch below.



Players will be able to switch roles at checkpoints, which should ensure that anyone lumbered with a poor Elara can persuade their ally back to the front line



The demo ended with Caddoc and Elara confronting the creature you can see below, a monster that could only be taken down through a combination of battle charge manoeuvres and some skilled teamwork





Over the course of the game, players will be able to purchase new spells and abilities by exchanging crystals found in the levels with a mysterious spirit who, incidentally, has also sent the characters on their mission

Enslaved: Odyssey To The West

There may never be another rush hour, but packs of killer robots mean the city's still a nightmare commute home

While Chinese epic Journey To The West has always been the inspiration behind *Enslaved*, it's now been officially awarded subtitle status. Reimagining one of the four great classical novels of Chinese literature as post-apocalyptic science-fiction is not an obvious choice, and shows Ninja Theory's ambition to blend narrative and game remains unchanged: the subtitle restates that intent.

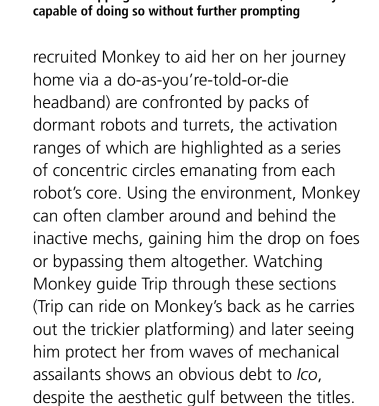
On hand to realise that ambition is a mix of talent that includes Andy Serkis, who stars as the game's male lead, Monkey, and Alex Garland, novelist and screenwriter (28 Days Later, Sunshine). According to **Tameen Antoniades**, Ninja Theory's co-founder and 'chief creative ninja', as the game has moved closer to completion Garland has moved from a purely scriptwriting role to one which sees him overseeing the direction of dramatic scenes and even influencing level design. Antoniades feels Garland's insight has been invaluable. "We thought we knew about storytelling," he says, wincing. "We knew nothing. It's been a very painful process."

But *Enslaved*'s literary influences and narrative ambition don't mean it forgets to be a game. And an uncommonly pretty one at that – the greens and reds of its plant life entwine with, grow out of and smother the grey concrete rubble that most other post-apocalyptic environments are happy to stop at. Animation, too, is equally characterful – Monkey climbs and vaults over cover in a manner befitting his name, and the game's robotic foes move with predatory grace.

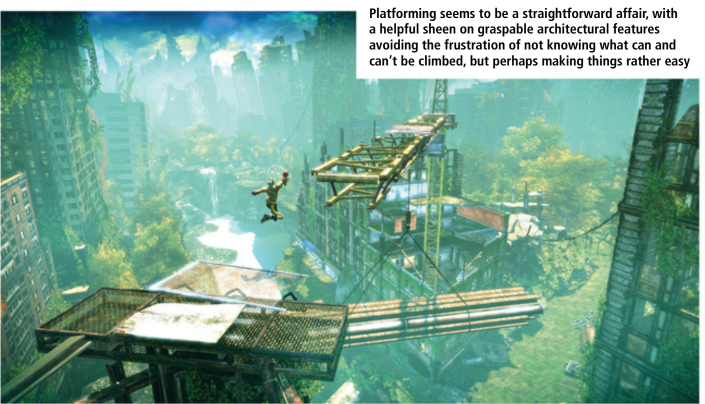
That's assuming you activate the robots at all, for alongside *Enslaved*'s brutal-looking combat (see 'Overstaffing') is an intriguing puzzle mechanic. Entering a room, Monkey and Trip (the technical genius who's forcibly recruited Monkey to aid her on her journey home via a do-as-you're-told-or-die headband) are confronted by packs of dormant robots and turrets, the activation ranges of which are highlighted as a series of concentric circles emanating from each robot's core. Using the environment, Monkey can often clamber around and behind the inactive mechs, gaining him the drop on foes or bypassing them altogether. Watching Monkey guide Trip through these sections (Trip can ride on Monkey's back as he carries out the trickier platforming) and later seeing him protect her from waves of mechanical assailants shows an obvious debt to *Ico*, despite the aesthetic gulf between the titles.

Trip's a bit handier than Yorda, however, and can temporarily distract enemies with a player-activated decoy, allowing Monkey, in one instance, to break cover and flank three robots holed up in a ruined building. Once inside, Monkey rips the gun from the back of one enemy before turning it on the others.

As *Enslaved* moves towards completion, it remains to be seen whether Ninja Theory will realise its ambition of crafting a title which balances narrative and play. If it doesn't, the game looks good enough to stand on the strength of its mechanics alone, but if it does, *Enslaved* may be the title to make good on the studio's potential.



In contrast to *Heavenly Sword*, we're promised there'll be no QTEs in *Enslaved*: though Monkey's certainly not averse to ripping a downed robot to shreds, he's fully capable of doing so without further prompting



Platforming seems to be a straightforward affair, with a helpful sheen on graspable architectural features avoiding the frustration of not knowing what can and can't be climbed, but perhaps making things rather easy

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **NINJA THEORY**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBA**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E208**



Overstaffing

Combat, in contrast to *Heavenly Sword*'s wide variety of combos and moves, is a built around a selection of key skills. Monkey, wielding a scavenged relic of mankind's technological highs – an extendable staff based on the magical weapon wielded by Sun Wukong, his Journey To The West analogue – is capable of a mixture of light and heavy attacks, some of which can be charged for extra damage. The staff doubles as a firearm, capable of stunning as well as firing energy rounds. Even Trip can defend herself: if she finds herself surrounded she can fire off an EMP blast as a last resort, though it requires time to recharge.

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA BLACK BOX**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **MAY 14**

Skate 3

EA Black Box aims for evolution not revolution in a Hawk-ousting sequel





Taking a lead from EA's *Burnout Paradise*, *Skate 3*'s online play enables friends to drop seamlessly in and out of each other's gaming sessions, with any progress made carrying over into the singleplayer career mode







Aware of the fact that many gamers chose to teleport between *Skate 2*'s challenges rather than skate their way around the world, developer Black Box has divided new city Port Carveton into three unconnected and original districts – Downtown, the University, and Industrial

After the thoroughly miserable experience of *Tony Hawk: Ride*, it's a reassuring relief to return to the complex analogue stick controls of *Skate*. EA's series is still a relative newcomer – the first *Skate* was released in late 2007 – but already it feels like the more assured and established of the two. The clumsy *Ride* controller was a nervous knee-jerk in the face of *Tony Hawk*'s first genuine competition, and *Skate 3* responds in measured fashion with a subtle refinement of its existing Flick-it control system, and a more thorough reworking of its wider world.

This is good news – the Flick-it controls are an elegant and intuitive translation of complex full-bodied actions into button presses and stick movements. It's a system strong enough to stand on its own without the need for progressive unveiling – all the tricks are available to the player from the game's start, with simple dexterity and the system's depth enough to provide a satisfying development arc. Tricks are performed by flicking the right stick to launch and spin the board, with subtle variations and button presses altering the resulting stunt. So an ollie is down and straight up, a kick flip is down and up to the side, and a kick flip with a grab is down, up to the side and R2. By contrast, *Ride* is like trying to play a violin by standing on it and kicking the strings.

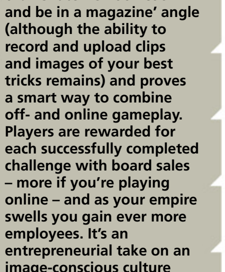
Although Flick-it comes with an exceptional level of articulation, it's also very hard. *Skate 3* responds by offering variable difficulty levels, with an easy mode featuring more magnet-like grinding and greater height from stick-flicking, which ironically brings it closer in line with the older *Hawk* titles. There's also the addition of a thorough and accessible tutorial fronted by pro-skater turned comic actor Jason Lee (a defection following his appearance in *Tony Hawk's Project 8*), essentially recycling his Earl Hickey persona as the tight-shorted Coach Frank. Key innovations here include a circular visualiser enabling players to see exactly where they're moving the stick (very often not where intended, it transpires), and a freeze mode which suspends skaters in mid-air until players tie their fingers in the appropriate knot to complete the trick. It's a manful attempt at making a very complicated system accessible.

Elegant controls aside, *Skate 2* had some clumsy moments, and most of *Skate 3*'s headline additions are an attempt to redress these. Stepping off the board to negotiate steps and reposition obstacles was poorly animated and unresponsive. Now the foot-on-ground walking, turning and jumping is more natural, and flows more fluidly in and out of the skating itself. And rather than just dragging objects around the world with their skater, players can now enter a dedicated park editor mode in which ramps, rails and half-pipes can be selected from a menu and accurately deployed where desired. Once designed and decorated, these can be uploaded for other players to download and share.

It's an encouraging set of improvements, and the near-finished build in our possession seems very robust. But, as with the *FIFA* football games and several other of EA's regular series, the biggest question won't be one of quality, but of progress. With less than 18 months between *Skate 3* and its predecessor, whether these welcome changes will be enough to justify the release of a new game remains to be seen. For now, well, just be thankful you're not playing *Ride*.



Rather than have you chased by surly guards for skating, as in *Skate 2*, *Skate 3* seems much happier to have you using its facilities. Create-a-park returns, allowing an element of wish-fulfilment for frustrated skateboarders



Brand of brothers

The central objective in *Skate 3*'s career mode is to launch a new skating and fashion brand along with an ever-growing group of friends. It's certainly more substantial than *Skate 2*'s 'look cool and be in a magazine' angle (although the ability to record and upload clips and images of your best tricks remains) and proves a smart way to combine off- and online gameplay. Players are rewarded for each successfully completed challenge with board sales – more if you're playing online – and as your empire swells you gain ever more employees. It's an entrepreneurial take on an image-conscious culture that's unexpectedly but entirely welcome.

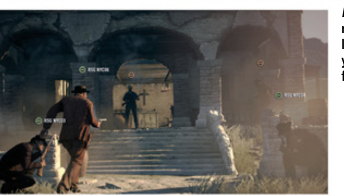




Redemption's 'Deadeye' aiming system reappears in multiplayer, though it can no longer be used to slow down time. 'Painting' your enemies in realtime before opening fire can become a tense battle of nerves







Red Dead Redemption

It's pistols, shotguns, rifles and dynamite at dawn in Rockstar's open-world multiplayer

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MAY 21**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E203, E212**

Cowboys and Indians isn't the playground favourite it once was, but the wild west is still a fertile and mostly untapped ground for multiplayer gaming. As are open worlds – and there are few more open than *Red Dead Redemption*'s desert plains. *GTAIV*'s multiplayer was a mostly successful experiment in taking the genre online, albeit one undermined by technical issues, and *Redemption* aims to take the formula established by that title and apply it to a setting undeniably wider in scope, and hopefully as rich in possibility.

As the demo begins, our gunslinger (part of a three-player 'posse') is on a ridge behind a small frontier town. An upwards tap on the D-pad calls over our horse and we trot towards the dusty high street at the centre of town. Then it all goes farcically wrong. Spotting a member of the rival posse, we fire off a series of rounds, at least one of which manages to hit a horse. Our wanted level rises, and moments later our first multiplayer death is not at the hands of another player, but those of a local lawman.

Whereas *GTAIV*'s free mode presented players with a Liberty City minus missions and many other diversions, *Redemption*'s Free Roam aims to be as full of distractions as the singleplayer game. To demonstrate, our posse leader sets a waypoint towards a small gang hideout, the clearing out of which is a chaotic affair. Quick respawn times ensure the gang never stands much of a chance, and once the clearout's complete, each player's kill tally (converted to cash) is displayed along with the option to restart.

Competitive modes provide greater challenge, and highlight the way *Redemption*'s open and expansive setting has allowed Rockstar to tailor certain areas of the map for multiplayer play. Hold Your Own, a capture the flag (or bag of gold) gametype, takes place in Diez Coronas, an open valley with small mining settlements situated on opposite sides. Shootouts segue into pitched horseback chases as the defenders try to reclaim the attacker's stolen loot, and at the centre of it all rests a cannon: powerful enough to turn the tide of battle, yet authentically tricky to aim.



Of all the modes available, Goldrush is perhaps the most likely to end in grudges: staking out a position by a deposit chest and taking out your opponent at the last moment is far too tempting a strategy

Other modes include Goldrush (a scramble to collect as many gold bags as possible) and both free-for-all and team-based variations of Shootout, a standard deathmatch. Irrespective of gametype, every match opens in classic western style with a duel – the last player standing gets a cash bonus and a head start on weapon pickups while their opponents respawn. Naturally, these duels usually descend into a parodic mixture of gunfire and sideways rolling from the spawn point, which doesn't make standing eye-to-eye with the player opposite while waiting for permission to draw any less of an intimately tense affair.

With a sound online infrastructure, *Redemption*'s multiplayer may well maximise the potential inherent in its setting for moments of drama, tension and hilarity. The question, really, is over where most of these moments may occur. If Rockstar can provide players with a Free Roam mode which underpins its potential for emergent play with a variety of objectives and distractions, then *Redemption* might be the game to lure players out of the ranch and on to the open range.

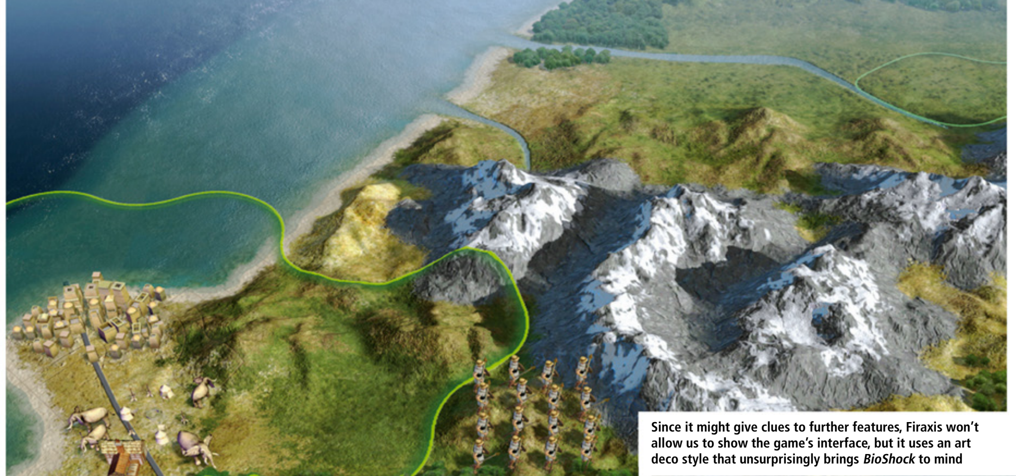


All the local fauna will reappear in Free Roam. At one point our ride was stalled while a member of Rockstar's PR team was harried by an unhappy-looking cougar



Earn your spurs

Redemption offers what is quickly becoming an essential multiplayer feature: a character levelling system. Killing enemies, bagging gold and winning matches garners experience points and, as your character levels, they get access to more and better weapons, among other things. Rockstar's PR explains to us that the mighty steed on which we're currently galloping across the prairie is also tied to the levelling system – players will initially find their whistles answered by a markedly less athletic mule. We're also promised greater XP rewards for players prepared to show off a bit: shoot the gun out of a character's hands, before relieving them of their hat in the same fashion, and you'll be on the receiving end of a large XP bonus.





To enhance the feeling of dealing with foreign powers, the leaders of opposing civilisations will speak in their own native tongues, meaning Bismark (below) addresses you in German, exactly as you'd expect



Since it might give clues to further features, Firaxis won't allow us to show the game's interface, but it uses an art deco style that unsurprisingly brings *BioShock* to mind

Civilization V

The legend returns with new hex appeal

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **FIRAXIS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER 1**

The progression of the *Civilization* series has been one of slow evolution rather than sweeping revolution. While Sid Meier personally designed an offshoot that truly altered the formula (the intentionally named *Civilization Revolution*, a largely successful attempt to make the series palatable to console gamers), for the main series he has tended to partner with designers – from Brian Reynolds to Soren Johnston – who have kept well within the framework laid down by the original *Civilization* in 1991.

Not so with *Civilization V*. Designed by Jon Shafer, who began as a beta tester and mod maker in the *Civilization* community, the title makes larger, further-reaching changes to the formula even than *Revolution* – none more immediately striking than the decision to change from the game's traditional grid-based maps to hexes.

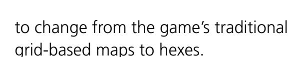
Hexes may bring to mind impenetrable war games, but in *Civilization V* they actually serve an important part of Firaxis' attempt to streamline the game's systems without losing any complexity. The range of terrain tiles is larger, allowing differentiation across continents, while hexes allow for more realistic map layouts – avoiding the flaw in earlier versions that saw units diagonally sneak across otherwise impassable features.

The addition of hexes, however, becomes more than a simple patch to a quirk of random map generation when considered in the context of *Civilization V*'s biggest alteration: only one combat unit may inhabit a space at a time. Unit stacking has been the series' inevitable strategy until now, leading to the 'stack of doom', featuring tens of units and wielded by both player and AI alike, which slowed down the endgame considerably. But *Civilization V* changes combat completely, with ranged units such as archers, in a first for the series, able to attack from a distance, and a far greater emphasis on keeping units alive rather than sacrificing them to wear down opponents.

Though these changes are likely to be highly controversial, *Civilization*'s representation of the rise of mankind across history has always been a series of abstractions. Moreover, the combination of the greater tactical nuance of hexes and an easier-to-manage combat model, where the situation is immediately apparent just from viewing the world map, promise to genuinely change not only combat but the game as a whole. Unit construction is now limited by resources. If you have access to only three iron resources, you may build only three iron-requiring units. And with only one unit per tile, the previous need for even peaceful civilisations to bend their cities towards high production in order to defend their borders has less emphasis, and an intention of the series' design since *Civilization III* – that diplomacy is equal to war in any budding civilisation's plans – may finally reach its end.

One final touch further changes the landscape – the addition of city-states, neutral cities with which players can choose to partner. Left unmolested, they can offer as many benefits as they might if conquered, from free units to scientific bonuses, and they mix things up in a game previously dominated by warring super-powers.

While the changes might upset the traditionalists, Firaxis hopes to create a game that maintains an even, consistently interesting pace, one which matches the thrill of discovery in the beginning with potentially subtler, and less time consuming, empire management.

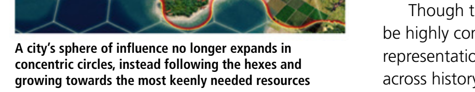


While in some cases units can still be garrisoned to defend cities, in a departure from previous games in the series they will only provide bonuses – cities will defend themselves





A city's sphere of influence no longer expands in concentric circles, instead following the hexes and growing towards the most keenly needed resources





Civil liberties

Unsurprisingly for a game designed by a previous modder, *Civilization V* is to ship with a full set of modding tools, but is also to offer a full in-game community hub through which these mods can be shared. Featuring achievements, mod and scenario sharing, and access to online, play-by-email (even hotseat and LAN) matches, the hub is intended to become the central point for the series' vast community, without replacing the importance of individual fan sites, which will be accessible from within the game's internal browser. For gamers who have become used to the series as a purely singleplayer experience, the easy access to human opponents – full of entirely human flaws, contradictions and urges – will come as a shock indeed.



The loosely drawn story has Lara finding, and then losing to a mercenary, the Mirror Of Smoke. Its protector, Totec, rises to help retrieve it before sunrise comes. Singleplayer mode features tweaked puzzles that don't require a second player – Crystal Dynamics doesn't want play upset by frustrating AI

Lara Croft And The Guardian Of Light

The much-travelled heroine raids a new environment – the digital download market – and this time she's not alone

Lara Croft's latest game is an unusual one. She's not alone, for starters. You won't be buying the game on a disc, either. And it's not called *Tomb Raider*. Instead, *Guardian Of Light* is a top-down, online/offline co-op action game that's set for downloadable release only. It's by no means a creation that should be ignored, however. Developed by series custodian Crystal Dynamics alongside a forthcoming big-budget outing, its world of deep chasms and towering ruins still boasts epic scale and close detail.

The development team are unashamed to acknowledge inspiration from downloadable headliners including *Braid* and *Trine*, alongside more aged games such as *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* and *Gauntlet*. The two players take control of Lara, who wields dual pistols and a grapple hook, and undead Mayan hero Totec, who can throw spears, fire a rifle and defend with a large shield. Crowded with enemies, half of the game is about fast-paced combat, with your character allowed to switch weapons without interrupting firing and infinite supplies of bombs. With a bestiary including soldiers and spiders, different tactics are needed for each – in a delightfully arcadey touch, giant ogre-like enemies explode on dying in a burst of radiating beams.

The other half is about exploration and puzzle-solving, which is where the interplay between the pair's skillsets comes into effect. Lara's grapple can stick to Totec – if one player's anchored, the other can swing from it. Totec can throw spears horizontally into walls, and the lighter Lara can walk on them and use Totec's shield as a platform. The puzzles we see are smartly drawn – one involves a set of stairs leading down to a tall tower with an artefact on top of it, too high to climb even if Lara stands on one of Totec's spears. The solution is for Totec to walk backwards up the steps, throwing a column of spears for Lara to ascend. Others include a co-op-friendly leap of faith, Totec relying on Lara to grapple him before he falls to his death, while a roster of pressure switches, pull switches, grapple points, giant rolling balls and other puzzle stalwarts add variety to the collaborative problem solving.

Alongside all this is the freewheeling competition between players to collect points from kills and gems scattered around the levels, channelling the furious glee of *Four Swords Adventures*, and there's some kind of 'meta' XP system Crystal isn't yet revealing.

And yet the result feels, for all its speed and levity, true to the *Tomb Raider* ethos. It holds the same blend of spatial puzzling and gunplay, its archaeology taken from the same broth of legend and fantasy. But it's certainly a fresh take. And it's also yet another game for downloadable platforms with production values that could equally warrant a disc release. With such extensive titles turning up, how much longer will Microsoft be able to meaningfully call its game download service Live Arcade?

The camera keeps both players in view at all times by zooming in and out, though hopefully at distance they won't be so close to the screen's edge that they can't see dangers. The two characters have similar abilities, so players don't have to play one with skills they don't like, unlike *Trine*'s approach of three very different heroes

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS/SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **CRYSTAL DYNAMICS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**



Playing fields

The levels are tuned to provide different types of play. The first we see is arranged around a hub and the need to collect three sun discs to progress. The order in which you visit the three connecting areas is up to you, allowing a sense of exploration even though the experience is tuned to be short and sharp rather than long and expansive. The second is set in a tomb of crumbling platforms in a deep underground chasm, a scene ripe for puzzle solving as you work out how to cross its abysses. And for extra challenge, levels also feature various non-vital puzzle tombs in which you'll find special artefacts – if you can solve them, that is.

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **BIZARRE CREATIONS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MAY 28**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E202**

Blur

We kick the tyres of Bizarre's latest, and get a load of the kickback



Visually, this isn't *Gran Turismo*. There are four tracks on the beta which differ in challenge and style, but there are few wow moments beyond those created by the jostling pack

We haven't revisited *Blur* since **E**202's cover story, but the current multiplayer beta shows exactly what we've been missing. The old '*Mario Kart* with cars' line may be an easy one, but it's accurate: up to 20 cars firing, boosting and shielding as they rip around the track makes you think of little else. *Blur* is breakneck and knockabout in the same breath.

Races begin with a rolling start, your position on the grid either random or determined by previous placings – but where you begin doesn't really matter. After a few seconds everyone with a specific mod (read: perk) gets their first power-up, and cars proceed to careen everywhere as bolt, shunt and barge attacks are unleashed.

They're the first of many things *Blur* gets just right. Bolt sees three arrow-like projectiles fired directly in front or behind – and when they hit, it hurts, sending a jolt through the chassis and causing the victim to lose control for just an instant. It's not so extreme that you can't recover, but it's enough at the wrong time to send you into a wall. It feels like someone pimped out *Halo*'s needler and stuck it on a bonnet.



Splitscreen is always welcome here at **Edge** HQ. Yes, of course we enjoy online play, but games like *Blur* benefit enormously from competition in the same room

Several weapons can be fired either forwards or backwards, so you can throw mines ahead of you or launch the shunt torpedo behind in order to neuter an approaching threat. After a few races, when you've had the opportunity to see what other drivers can do with these weapons, you're soon making the most of your repertoire, using bolts on opponents as they negotiate tricky curves, or selecting barge attacks to propel others off a cliff.

The attacks and crashes are always a shock, but the game deals with them fluidly, jolting your view around for a moment before you regain control and begin accelerating again. For all of *Burnout Paradise*'s good points, you can end up far from the pack after a few slips online, but *Blur*'s more forgiving. A recent seventh-out-of-nine finish, for example, was the result of being on the receiving end of too many shunts but using barge attacks to pull in front of two opponents inches from the line.

As for the social media side that once seemed so important to the game, it's been significantly toned down. Forget Facebook – the only phenomenon *Blur*'s slipstreaming is *Modern Warfare*. There are perks, persistent levelling unlocks better cars, and subsidiary challenges hand out experience bonuses every few races. It's well implemented and a proven formula, the only flat note being the rather unimaginative challenges: shunt 50 cars, then shunt 100 for the next prize, then 250 and so on. From the minds behind *PGR4*'s achievements, you'd expect a little more flair – but perhaps that arrives later.

This is, as the game says every time it boots, simply a beta, and not representative of final quality. If it were? The only problem we've noticed with *Blur* was when we got ahead, knew all the power-up positions and boosted and shielded home easily on an identical driving line every lap. You'd hope there's an option to randomise power-ups, and let their effects do the rest. That aside, *Blur* offers plenty of thrills as its pack of 20 cars bang each other all over the place, with no fixed positions from first to last. The beta is limited, but if its potential is realised in the final game we could be looking at a firm multiplayer favourite.



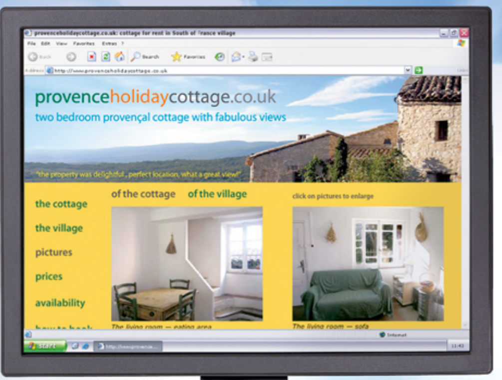
Fan service

There's a little *MSR* in the fan-based scoring system, which rewards you for the manner in which you're playing as well as your race standings. Hitting your opponents with any weapons awards a few, but if you dodge a shunt in the same breath then boost away, picking up a shield and quickly using it to guard against a flurry of incoming bolts, the awards are handed out faster than they can be displayed onscreen, while a combo meter ticks up and multiplies the fans awarded for each bit. Your levelling depends on the fans, so this system's a significant part of the game, and explains why even getting a non-podium finish can still prove exhilarating.



The lobby lets you fiddle with your setup, but the gap between races feels a little too long. Perhaps an express option for matchmaking will be in the final version

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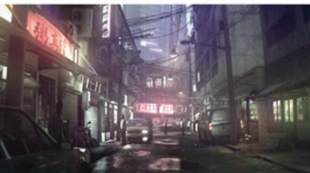
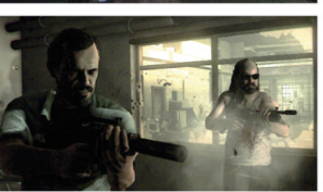
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IO has described its approach to directing the action as 'docu-shooter', and it's easy to see why. The camera's movement is as erratic as any panicked observer, and the action feels less contrived than in many action games



Feedback for the original game revealed that players engaged far more with Lynch – this despite (or perhaps because of) his mentally disturbed nature. Here we find him settled into a new life in Shanghai's underworld

Kane & Lynch: Dog Days

Never mind the psychos – the camera is the star in IO's shooter sequel

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
RELEASE: **AUGUST 27**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **IO INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **DENMARK**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E211**

In thirdperson games there's a distance between the protagonist and the player. It positions you snugly over the shoulder of the poor schmuck firing the gun, unfazed by even the most savage of blows. In *Kane & Lynch: Dog Days* that distance has never felt smaller.

IO's presentational style, which immediately brings to mind the world of YouTube videos and movies like The Hurt Locker, delivers an unvarnished action vibe, and the result is a shooter that makes you feel less like a puppet master with a flak jacket and more like a frazzled war reporter. Taking great pains to emulate the quirks of the digital video age, its visual makeup is littered with flourishes that make you more aware of your own presence behind the viewfinder than ever before. Faster action sequences cause blurs of pixelation, light sources flare and streak, and even loading sequences are dressed up as buffering.

Not that IO's game should be mistaken for art house fare, however. *Kane & Lynch* is every bit the action movie wannabe its predecessor was. Plot-wise, it's certainly more convincing, swapping as it does the original's tale of redemptive revenge for a heist gone badly wrong. This time Lynch takes the antihero role with Kane as backup and occasional voice of reason. It's an astute shift that plays well with the game's new approach.

The pseudo-military elements of the first game have been dropped, and Kane's mercenary background has given way to his partner's unpredictable neuroses. As a result, any pretence of tactics is elbowed aside in favour of dynamic action that has the player blasting through walls and into soft flesh one moment and kicking down locked doors the next.

It's a change of pace that reveals the game's improved shooting and cover mechanics, but better demonstrates the brilliance of that new presentation. A particularly fraught trek across a Shanghai highway is a case in point. As Kane and Lynch drag the latter's new boss though what is rapidly becoming a warzone, every firearm report feels like a body blow.

Later, playing the game's restaurant siege section, the camera matches our every movement and frequent retreats into cover with erratic moves of its own. As a shotgun blast lifts Lynch off his feet we almost feel as though we're sprawled on the floor with him. Our instinct is to scrabble away, even as we drag the reticule up the screen to return fire.

Dog Days appears to do little to move the mechanics of the thirdperson shooter forward, but its presentation (so ineffectively conveyed in static screens) delivers more realism than high-gloss, high-detail textures ever could. It's a bold approach certain to find imitators in future titles.



What headshot?

Fetishised headshots are so last year. The influence of shocking internet videos looms large as, in a rare moment of restraint, IO goes so far as to add Vaseline smears to those ubiquitous and grisly headshot kills. Initially it seems incongruously prudish given the high level of general violence on offer, but it's merely a subtle acknowledgement of the source material that does as much to lighten the mood as Lynch's sweary asides.



Dog Days finds its best expression in movement – these static screens struggle to convey the rawness of the action around Shanghai's commercial district. The result is a game that feels more grittily realistic than most other shooters



FORMAT: **MAC, PC**
PUBLISHER: **MINOR STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SPRING**

Atmosphir

A look at the latest experiment in user-generated PC content

Play, create, share – Sony may have made it a slogan, but these are hardly novel ideas on the PC. Nonetheless, some important lessons have been learned from bringing user content to console: out of necessity, devs had to find slick ways to package these three things together, and with titles like *Neverdaunt: 8bit*, *Minecraft* and now *Atmosphir*, it's clear that game creation tools for the PC scene have made similar headway.

This browser-based platformer allows players to cobble levels together from cubes – potentially a million of them – and tweak everything from the properties of a falling-spike trap to the elaborate win conditions of a game. No programming's required, with everything handled via easily parsed menus.

"Making the switch to the Unity engine has given us some great capabilities with gravity and physics properties," says **Dave Werner**, CEO at Minor Studios. "People are making some awesome stuff already. One of the best levels I've seen so far is called Somewhere Way Over The Rainbow, an insane race level created by a 34-year-old operations manager for a sticker and magnet company in North Carolina. It's this outer-space racetrack where you have to reach all of these checkpoints before time runs out, all while shifting gravity as you spin through corkscrews, loops, and more. I love seeing stuff like that, when the community really pushes the tools into creative, fresh gameplay ideas."

Undergoing a closed beta at the time of writing, *Atmosphir* is intended for imminent launch, whereupon players will be able to sign up for free, and optionally spend money on items like outfits, weapons, taunts and dances. "There's also a club membership that gives you a monthly allowance for buying that stuff as well as some exclusive gifts and goodies," says Werner. "We're trying not to charge for design items so our designers can have unrestricted access to making the best possible levels."

Minor Studios is promising free expansions, with new cube sets and properties, but it's already proved that the most important building blocks are community and creativity.





Earlier iterations have seen the game move from downloadable client to web browser. Creations are now easily shared through the game's portal, with peer ratings, comments and community features



Minor Studios is keen to foster its community's creativity, setting up regular competitions which challenge players to create anything from racecourses to boss battles, trumpeting the winners in a video podcast

Prince Of Persia: The Forgotten Sands

Ubisoft turns back time all the way to the last generation's trilogy, but things aren't quite the same

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **MAY 20**

"It's not the game of the film," says **Jan-Erik Sjovall**, the animation director for *Prince Of Persia: The Forgotten Sands*. "It's the game of the game." And that game, of course, is 2003's *The Sands Of Time*. The Prince is sporting his *Warrior Within* get-up, (the same one Jake Gyllenhaal wears in the film, incidentally), but in all other respects this is the closest Ubisoft has come to a return to the first title in the *Sands* series since *Warrior Within* abandoned Arabian Nights in favour of gothic spires and nu-metal.

That means that the instant restarts of the 2008 game are gone, and the time-reversal mechanic returns. The Prince has a new suite of elemental powers, however, one of which exists at the core of the game's platforming. At any moment, holding down the left trigger will freeze nearby water sources, turning them to convenient poles to swing from and columns to climb. While there are occasions during our demo that use this cleverly – requiring the player to freeze and unfreeze water sources in order to grab hold or pass through them as needed – it also, at times, feels dangerously close to being merely an extra button to hold down.

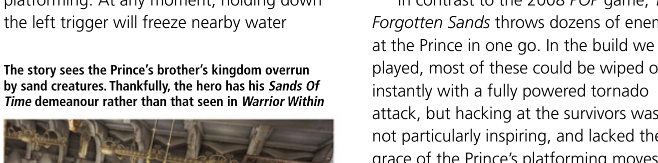
In contrast to the 2008 *POP* game, *The Forgotten Sands* throws dozens of enemies at the Prince in one go. In the build we played, most of these could be wiped out instantly with a fully powered tornado attack, but hacking at the survivors was not particularly inspiring, and lacked the grace of the Prince's platforming moveset.

The elegant environmental manoeuvres of *The Sands Of Time* and its sequels are still here, and there are moments when *The Forgotten Sands* recaptures the first game's exhilarating flow. Yet it seems at risk of frustrating, by letting its new mechanics obscure and overcomplicate the old. A direct sequel to *The Sands Of Time* has been on everyone's wish list since 2003, and we'll soon see if it was worth the wait.

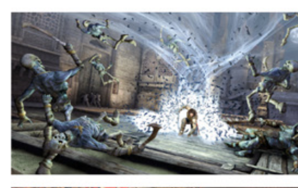


Architectural contrivance has always been a feature of the *Prince Of Persia* games, but there's something especially incongruous about a lever which causes dozens of jets of water to burst from a wall

The story sees the Prince's brother's kingdom overrun by sand creatures. Thankfully, the hero has his *Sands Of Time* demeanour rather than that seen in *Warrior Within*



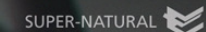






The Prince has a variety of elemental attacks at his disposal. Water and air can be summoned offensively whereas earth grants a temporary armour shell





SUPER-NATURAL

HYDROPHOBIA IS AN XBLA GAME WITH TRIPLE-A AMBITIONS AND LANDMARK TECHNOLOGY. THREE YEARS AFTER WE TOUCHED THE SURFACE, IT'S TIME TO PLUMB THE DEPTHS

Of all the creatures in videogames, the most animalistic is the water in *Hydrophobia*. It splashes, slops, creeps, crashes, swells and explodes. It topples, steals, threatens, breaks, confuses and kills. It is restless and irresistible. And, no, it's not a trick.

Our last encounter was in 2007 when it was tamer, caged within some unseen cruise ship. Now that it's been unleashed, it's hard to know what's more shocking: how it behaves or where.

To paraphrase a message repeated time and again by developer Dark Energy Digital, *Hydrophobia* is a triple-A-quality game for Xbox Live Arcade, made by just 40 people at a fraction of the usual cost, and occupying on your hard drive just a fraction of the usual space. If you take triple-A to mean a cross between *Tomb Raider*, *Psi-Ops* and *BioShock*, with production values and scope unheard of in a download game and rare in most others, then all of this is true. *Hydrophobia* is such a complete and convincing endeavour that Microsoft, its publisher, is touting it as the next step on from *Shadow Complex*.

HYDROPHOBIA IS SUCH A COMPLETE AND CONVINCING ENDEAVOUR THAT MICROSOFT, ITS PUBLISHER, TOUTS IT AS THE NEXT STEP ON FROM SHADOW COMPLEX

Scepticism is natural at this point, and healthy. For all its groundbreaking potential, we've seen *WarDevil*; we know what it's like to leave on an empty stomach, technically stuffed but craving evidence of gameplay. With the murkiest era in gaming history just around the corner, prophets and evangelists abound. We remember this as we're buzzed in to a humble office in central Manchester, where the names of famous football stadia are etched on the doors for reasons unknown. Behind those doors, though, a game is almost finished. We've played it – and having seen its origins and heard its destination, our only craving is to play more.

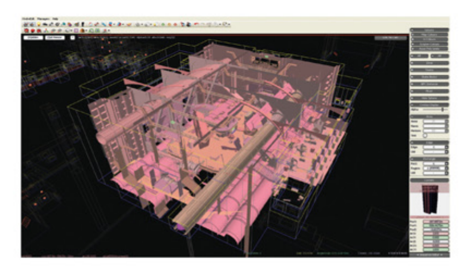
It's set on a city at sea, the Queen Of The World, in a story from tomorrow's headlines. It deals with the elephant in the room of global current affairs: overpopulation. There are 9.8 billion people on its Earth, just a smidge higher than actual UN projections for the near future. Built by a cadre of philanthropists and businesses, home to the world's wealthy elite, the Queen is a stateless paradise made to sail around national laws and politics. Among its founding fathers, each represented by a gleaming skyscraper, are the companies Electrocorp and NanoCell. They've devised nanomachines to farm the planet's last sufficient resource: water, which they can purify at the molecular level. They are, effectively, the last hope for mankind. The last *good* hope.

But as in many stories about conflict over dying resources – *Dune II* and *Command & Conquer* spring to mind – the humanitarians aboard the Queen have an opposite. The neo-Malthusians, an extremist organisation loyal to the writings of 19th century economist Thomas Malthus, believe that humans themselves are the problem. Seeing in the Queen a potential doomsday weapon, they mobilise a plan to slash civilisation to a "sustainable" half a billion.

TITLE: **HYDROPHOBIA**
FORMAT: **360, PS3 (TBA)**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **DARK ENERGY DIGITAL**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2010**



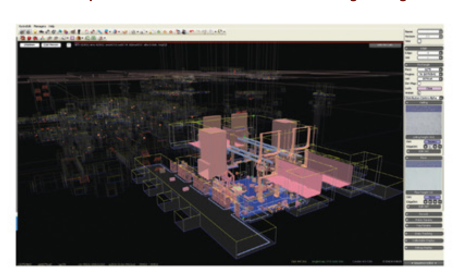


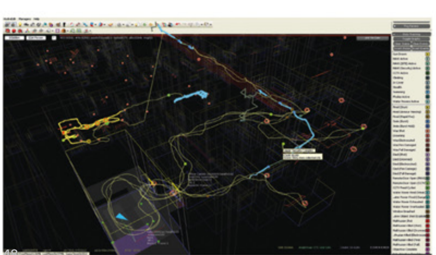


CHARTED WATERS

Another trick up Infinite Worlds' sleeve is a data tracker that is, believes Deb Jones, "the best of all data trackers." What does that mean? For testers, designers and anyone who cares to know, it provides complete and versatile data on everything a player does. It's completely automated and runs in the background, even in the custom map built during our interview. All weapon use is logged, while the player's path is recorded, making it painfully clear when they get lost. Emotions like frustration, boredom or excitement can be manually logged during proper QA, or usually inferred just from the data. "It's a really powerful tool," says Hewson, "because any state or event can be tracked."

"We don't want this to be about gun combat more than all the other aspects," adds Leach, "so if she's got her gun out for 75 per cent of the time, there's something wrong."





Targeting a lavish tenth anniversary party that will be broadcast around the word, they smuggle themselves aboard and raise hell. Caught in the crossfire is you, engineer Kate Wilson, and you have more than terrorists to worry about.

"The experience should tell the narrative, that's where games have their strength," says senior designer **Rob Hewson**, "so it comes down to things like AI behaviour. And the neat thing about how Kate gets drawn in to the fight is that the Malthusians are blocking escape routes to create panic, rigging transports to explode, so the only ones left are the ones they're using themselves. So she gets naturally drawn into NanoCell and what's going on in their labs, and into the darker side of it."

More Ellen Ripley than Lara Croft, faced with perils worthy of John McClane, Kate is the star of a feature-packed action game. There are climbing-frame puzzles built around *Disaster Report*-style dangers. There's a cover system which includes the usual snapping and ducking; reluctant combat spanning stealth, run-and-gun, and underwater battles; *Arkham Asylum*-style gadget puzzles; *Metroid Prime*-style 3D navigation and in-world scanning; storytelling collectibles and cinematic cutscenes; mortal characters with entire plot strands to rescue. "We actually subdivided our Achievements because traditionally you can only have 12," says Hewson, "then *Perfect Dark* went and raised the cap."

We end up playing quite a bit more than Dark Energy planned to show – not some accidental-on-purpose stunt, either – which starts with a build that, at time of writing, was heading to this year's Penny Arcade Expo East showcase in Boston. We've skipped a prologue in which Kate starts the day in her apartment, looking out over the sun-drenched, Central Park-style hub of the game's upper deck. Of the five towers of the founding fathers, four drill symmetrically into the Queen's deepest bulkheads, which is where Kate is stationed when the attack begins.

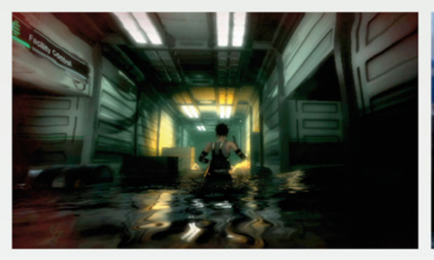
As we take control, immediately apparent are the range and quality of the game's effects. Flames lick realistically around objects while smoke follows the contours of walls and ceiling. Sparks fly everywhere yet the lighting is subtle, preserving details like skin tone and texture. State-of-the-art holographic billboards and information displays are in their death throes, flickering with Malthusian propaganda. "Save the world," they say. "Kill yourself." Comparisons to *Dead Space* and *Crysis* (not that the developer has made any) seem a lot less ridiculous than they would have minutes earlier. The ambient audio avoids being chaotic while still evoking chaos.

Dark Energy worries about the level of gun combat in the game. The number of guns in screenshots suggest *MGS* more than *Disaster Report*, but the dynamism of water and world should spice it up

Thanks, perhaps, to the developer's QA process (see 'Charted waters'), Microsoft's, or both, this is all extremely accomplished for an XBLA game. Menus, prompts and exposition are, while not quite 'triple-A' at its most immaculate, handled extremely respectably, and controls are sensible and efficient. Hidden by dynamic shadows, meanwhile, betrayed by glints of light, are all the treasures – audio logs, emails, trinkets – you'd expect of a game with a universe, not a random chain of maps and ideas.

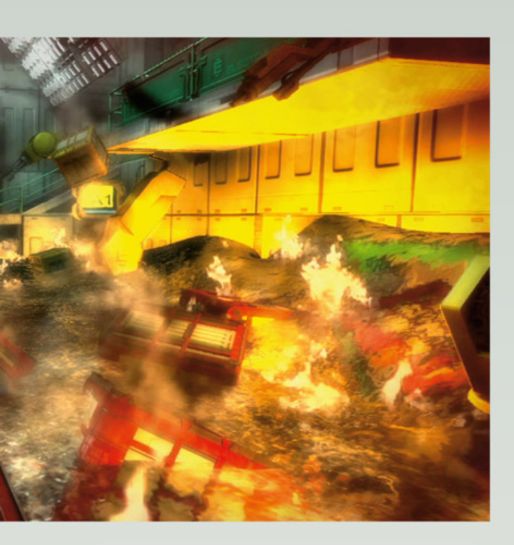
Disarmed as we are by thoughts of this costing around £10 (or $15, both unconfirmed) and 600MB of hard drive space (without audio streams) for about eight hours of replayable action (believable), this is enthralling stuff. Kate isn't perfect: when

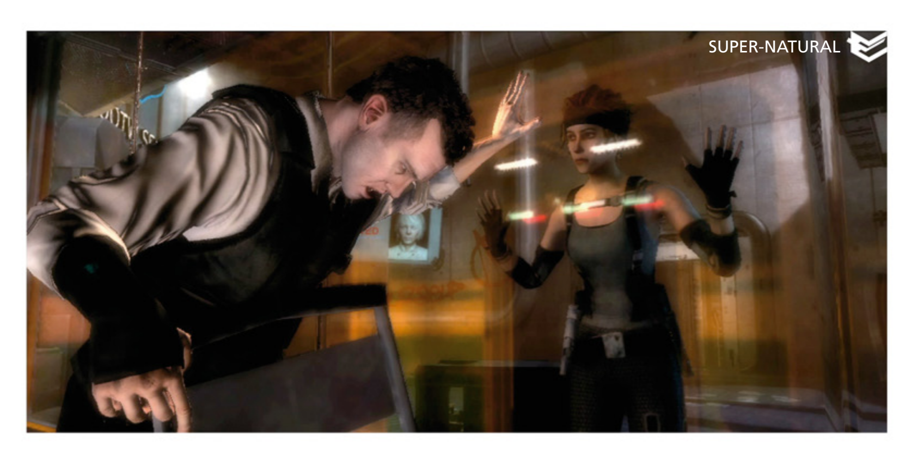
FLAMES LICK AROUND OBJECTS WHILE SMOKE FOLLOWS THE CONTOURS OF WALLS. SPARKS FLY EVERYWHERE YET THE LIGHTING IS SUBTLE, PRESERVING DETAILS LIKE SKIN TONE





One of our favourite traits of the tech powering the water is its ability to cover just part of the floor, seeping across in tiny measures before swelling to create problems – and opportunities. The team's currently trying to improve Kate's animation as she escapes it to get to dry land





CHARACTER BUILDING

Through emails, dialogue and chance encounters, the opening episode will set up several characters whose roles emerge later in the series. It's important to create that stock, says Pete Jones, "as there are some quite powerful standoffs between members of the cast." The biggest supporting role in the first episode is Kate's boss, Scoot, who acts as guide and mentor through the early stages. The game's title refers to the drowning of Kate's sister as a child, which has given the heroine an intense fear of water which echoes similar mind games in *Metal Gear Solid 2*. Hewson calls his character-building method the "Thelma & Louise approach," using trivial items, possessions and scenery for added exposition.





drenched, she looks like she's survived a trip through a laminator, while her voice acting's only passable and her facial animation is a work in progress – but these are peripheral points. The objective marker needs to convey altitude better. The camera, though comparable to and often more effective than *Tomb Raider Underworld*'s, needs a few more contextual uses, but we're assured this will be addressed.

Joint managing director **Deb Jones** seems especially vexed by the odd understandable beta quirk – an amusing contrast to fellow MD **Pete Jones**, her softly spoken husband – while Hewson is reportedly very hands-on with things like vocal sessions and the fluency of play. Since that reveal a few years ago, the studio's "kept our powder dry," says Pete Jones, for fear of making promises it can't keep.

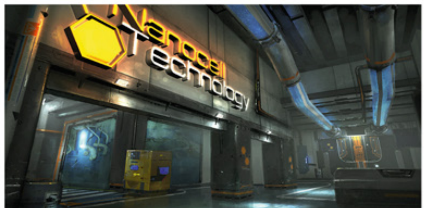
The one promise it's always made, however, the revolutionary fluid dynamics of its HydroEngine, is literally staggering in realtime. Not that the water always bowls Kate over – that, the team recognises, would be just plain annoying – but it certainly can. Throwing caustics (light reflections) on the ceiling and reflecting everything on its surface, changing the environment from one frame to the next, it can't just be called an effect. The surface foam and spray that highlight its movements, maybe, but otherwise this is heavy, game-changing tech. Comparisons with *BioShock*, inevitable as they are, really don't apply.

"I know *BioShock* would have loved to have had flowing, dynamic water," says Deb Jones. "And they tried for it but couldn't pull it off. It's incredible what you can do with it."

"Getting it fast enough is one thing, but the killer is getting it stable," explains **Huw Lloyd**, technical director, physics guru and inventor. "This always used to be the problem with physics engines: you'd stack a few things together and they'd start to go wrong. That's all OK now, but doing fluid simulation and not having it blow up is another thing entirely."

On a strategic level, especially, the interaction between the water and its environment is where game and engine shine. Blow up a barrel and it'll create an oil fire carried on the waves, moving







unpredictably. Glass walls and windows act as dams which let you admire the water's natural profile, but if they're hit by a bullet, the crack will gradually spider out under pressure. When it finally gives way, the water bears down with the force you'd expect – unfortunate for anyone stood in its way. Electricity passes between conductive elements and endures across realistic distances, so while shooting a 'physicalised' cable into a pool is exact scientifically, it's not what you'd call an exact science.

Already, then, you can see the potential for emergent combat. Electrify water, break glass and fry passing enemies. Blast barrel, open door and watch as a tide of napalm engulfs a distant patrol. Don't like the layout of a room? Flood it and watch the cover points float into new positions, adding another axis to the combat. Drier opportunities involve using Kate's MAVI, a screen she unspools from a tube, to scan the environment, see through walls or daisychain hijacked CCTV cameras for a strategic edge. A neat side-effect of this is that it renders water in wireframe, giving you an instant impression of its genuine flow.

There's more. Secrecy surrounds the nanomachines for a good and rather scary reason: they're built to purify water, which happens to constitute much of the human body. Their people skills are untested, but that changes when Kate, later in this first episode's three acts, becomes exposed to them. If you've seen The Abyss or read Greg Bear's Blood Music, you can imagine what happens next. Now a blood relative of the swirling tides, she gains a new crosshair and some rather epic abilities.

Pulling the trigger in these stages produces a column of water that never breaks from physical reality, sucking in objects through a counter-current at its base, bobbing hapless enemies on its peak and wrapping around objects in its path. Though it is a bit tricky for the first-time player, you can build, steer and slam it to devastating effect. It diffuses blood and splats it on the walls, the water level around it dropping as it's consumed. More water, then, means more power, which means another gambit thrown



ALL THINGS

If you asked 2K to draw Rapture – a top-down, coherent rendering for both *BioShock* games – you have to wonder if it could do it. And if there even is a layout, it's seldom clear while you actually play the games. If you ask the makers of *Hydrophobia*, you end up looking at two giant blueprints of the entire Queen Of The World, deck by deck, clearly marked with every major waypoint. Pete Jones explains how Infinite Worlds should make the whole thing accessible as the series nears its end, Kate gaining control of a bullet train system that circles the entire ship. With no need for loading screens like those of most games, not to mention the MAVI map, the trip should be a scenic and revealing one.



At 3km long and 2km wide, the Queen is a "parody of social structure," says Pete Jones. The Habitation City area has been nicknamed Proleville by the community, and sounds like an industrial slum






Huw Lloyd, technical director



Deb Jones, joint MD



Gary Leach, toolset designer



Pete Jones, joint MD



Rob Hewson, senior designer

into the combat. And whatever the learning curve, it works better than anything in *The Force Unleashed*.

This all occurs around various parts of the Queen's interior, the architecture changing slightly with each deck, the rooms switching between corridors, plazas and mangled stairwells. A separate demo, though, complete with AI, water, environmental kills and gun combat, is a first for even Dark Energy. It's been built using Infinite Worlds, the developer's bespoke toolset, during the first hour of our interview. Like the rest of *Hydrophobia*, it's largely procedurally generated, which is why the game data is so compact – and much of the reason why Microsoft's so excited.

"There are a number of game creation systems out there," says Pete Jones. "Our big difference with this one is that we can create a game to a ludicrously small file size. I use the analogy of '50s cars in America: the gas was really cheap and no one gave a damn about the size of the engines, just as in our market they're not bothered about games coming out at seven or eight gigabytes. As long as it looks the part and fits on a disc, you can sell the game at retail. But the credit crunch has changed all that. To a large extent, the retail financial model is compromised.

"One of the salient things right now is that such a large proportion of games is sold through the supermarkets, and the supermarkets just want the top ten. Primarily, they want the top five. So the whole middle ground of the market that used to have such rich games, it just isn't happening. It's changed out of sight in recent years."

As Infinite Worlds mastermind **Gary Leach** explains, changing the rules of the download market was not the objective from the start. "One of the central ideas was to redress the balance between art and design. One of the big things we struggled with in the past – that a lot of people struggled with – is the idea that, once the artist had produced a piece of a level, a designer had to get their hands on it and see if it works. That's quite a bridge to get across."

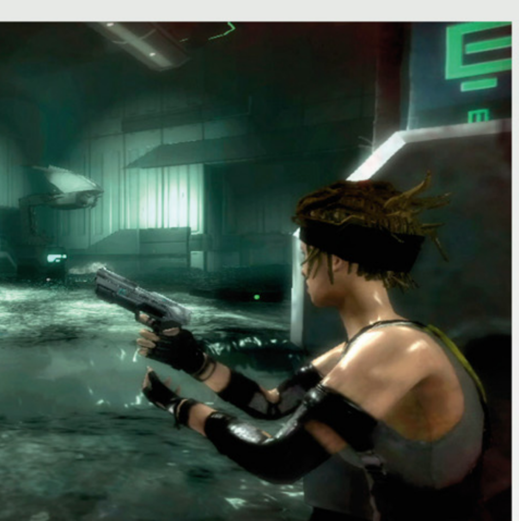
As well as performing the live multiplatform development boasted by CryEngine 3, we're told, this engine does it all across a network of users simultaneously, preserving an infinite undo history for every object forever, and outputting in realtime to unified debug and retail code. Rather than using expensive 3D meshes, it draws the entire game mathematically, shifting the load to CPUs. The game's textures are procedural as well, calculating crisp layers of detail and adding them to basic tiles. The results show little-to-no repetition, load almost instantly and cost, says Leach, "just a handful of bytes".

The benefits of this method, beyond its incredible economy, are far-reaching. As *Hydrophobia*'s acts and episodes build – and are built – to reveal the Queen in its entirety, the size of the game remains small. You could, we're told, load its entire open world into memory at once, which is just what Dark Energy plans to do. You could also have textures that change dynamically, becoming rusted or blemished by the water. You could switch environments dramatically without the hindrance of streaming, meaning instant flashbacks of any shape or size. Procedural geometry, furthermore, gives the AI an immediate, intuitive knowledge of its ever-changing environment. Is the long-term plan to license this tech? Absolutely, says Deb Jones, but only after it's proved itself.

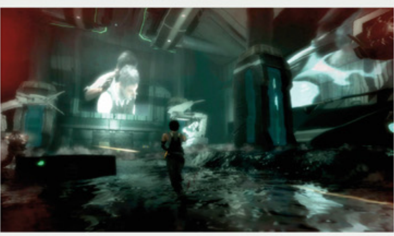
"SUPERMARKETS JUST WANT THE TOP TEN GAMES. PRIMARILY, THEY WANT THE TOP FIVE. SO THE WHOLE RICH MIDDLE GROUND HAS CHANGED OUT OF SIGHT IN RECENT YEARS"

Hydrophobia is, at most, a timed Xbox exclusive. Much of its tech was developed with PS3 in mind, and failing some egregious twist by Microsoft, its arrival on Sony's console seems inevitable. And, as *Shadow Complex* has shown, its reception will depend on value for money as much as, if not more than, its actual quality. All signs point, then, to it dropping a bomb on the download market, a cheap and tiny shell with a massive payload. Moreover, it'll be the first in a very feasible barrage of preconceived, densely plotted episodes.

The problem is that it's likely to get exactly what Dark Energy's wished for: to be judged as a triple-A title. After all, what other reference points are there for a game of this size and ambition? Even *Shadow Complex*, the current high-water mark, withdrew to the 2D comfort zone of *Metroid* and *Contra*. But this, of course, is the whole point. Starting now, expect to see those numbers repeated over and over: 40 people, 600MB (though our suspicion is something closer to a gigabyte), eight hours for just a cursory playthrough, and a pittance to pay for the pleasure. To the existing machinery of the videogame industry, those numbers simply don't add up. *Hydrophobia* is, in all likelihood, a sea change.





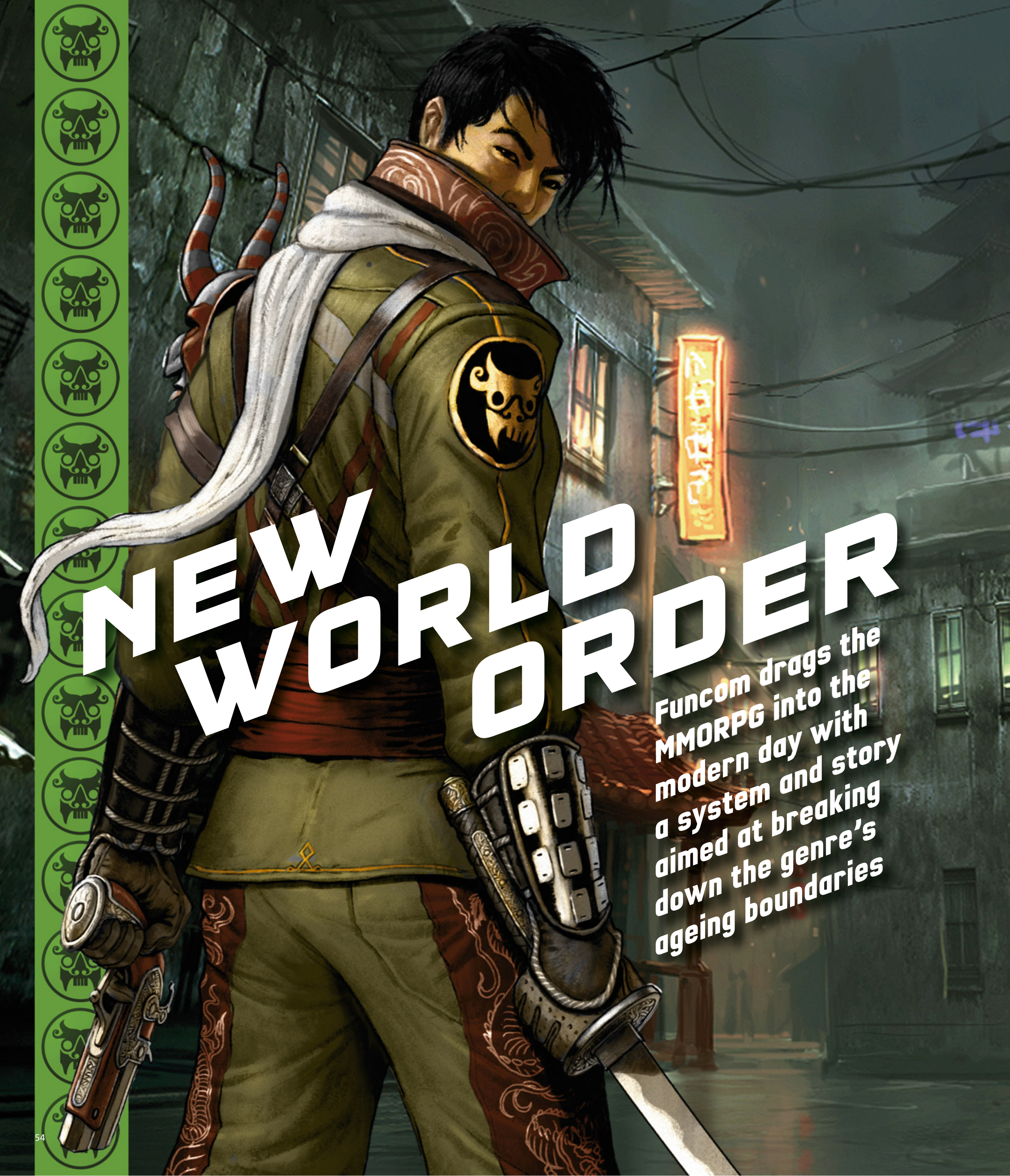


References for heroine Kate have ranged from Natalie Portman (oh, please) to Hellboy's Selma Blair (oh, all right). After much discussion about how to make sopping wet, *realistic* hair (something games still struggle with), the sensible option of dreadlocks was chosen



NEW WORLD ORDER

Funcom drags the MMORPG into the modern day with a system and story aimed at breaking down the genre's ageing boundaries



Kingsmouth, Maine: a cute seaside town with a thimble-sized population and white picket fences. Its simple, honest residents don't have a care in the world. What better place for a zombie invasion, complete with slimy sea monsters and a 20-foot-tall crab beast?

This early section from Funcom's upcoming *The Secret World* feels familiar – maybe too familiar. Horror in New England is Stephen King's turf. There are nods to H P Lovecraft as well, especially in the designs of the monsters, whose skin splits the difference between rank fungus and a torn raincoat. And another influence is undeniable: Kingsmouth looks a lot like *Left 4 Dead*, from the tank zombie that charges down the street to the ironic graffiti on the road sign leading into town. *The Secret World* boasts a mélange of influences. But will it be a hodge-podge?

Some influences it doesn't take on are those from its own genre. A massively multiplayer online game with a dark fantasy tone, *The Secret World* takes place in the modern world. A mysterious, ancient evil is threatening the planet. You've been chosen to fight back, but while you get to be the hero, you're forced to ally with a shady secret organisation which may have an agenda of its own.

Funcom is no stranger to online games. Its hard sci-fi MMOG *Anarchy Online* has run for almost a decade, bolstered by an ad-sponsored free-to-play option. The developer ventured out again with 2008's *Age Of Conan: Hyborian Adventures*, which tried to crack the crowded swords and sorcery market with an iconic hero, mature content and freewheeling brutality. But an idiosyncratic and problematic battle system, delays in releasing high-level content and the lure of the polish and depth of *World Of Warcraft* led half of its players to quit in its first quarter, casting a pall that the game has still to shake.

Which is enough to say that the team at Funcom understands the stakes. With no release date announced, it's designing *The Secret World* to be flexible and inclusive – friendly to newcomers and light on grinding, and yet deep enough for hardcore veterans. And its fiction sets it apart, tapping the strange imagination and perverse humour of Funcom's biggest name, **Ragnar Tørnquist**.

Tørnquist, a youthful 40-year-old with an easy laugh and a bush of curly hair, is *The Secret World*'s director and producer, helming the game alongside lead designer **Martin Bruusgaard** (who comes to the project from *Age Of Conan*). Tørnquist made his name with the graphical adventure *The Longest Journey* and its sequel, the action-adventure *Dreamfall*. These games successfully crossed science-fiction and fantasy, mixing evocative and paranormal imagery with everyday and urbane references, and a knack of delivering deep lore with gentle wryness. Whether you were mingling



***The Secret World* isn't (just) a zombie game – but players will get their fill of the undead in Kingsmouth, and those killed today are more than happy to come back fighting tomorrow, the day after…**

with hipster riff-raff at a college café, or talking to a being that's been trapped between worlds for a thousand years, Tørnquist's stories felt intimate, important – and real.

A modern world where something otherworldly lurks past every corner: this was the promise of *The Secret World*, and it's the reason so many jaded MMOG players are willing to hear it out.

Kingsmouth's survivors are simply trying to keep their heads in the face of madness. Each fits a familiar type: the unsophisticated but good-natured police officer; the tight-lipped government agents; the loner camped out in the woods with a rifle and a cowboy hat; the elderly African-American with a menial job but a knack for the supernatural.

"Kingsmouth is a town with a dark history that goes back hundreds of years," explains Tørnquist. We learn that a ship called The Lady Margaret came to shore, and that's when the trouble began. A giant fog encircled Solomon Island, where the town is located, and no one (but the players) can get in or out: neither the tiny airport nor the giant bridge to the mainland offers an escape, and the locals who venture into the fog come back as monsters. Every day, the survivors put down the shambling remains of their friends and family, and every morning the bodies start walking again.

Which makes sense, because after all, this is an MMOG. The zombies have to keep coming back. The survivors can never leave. The form limits the storytelling, but Tørnquist suggests that all of this has been woven into the narrative. "The kind of missions [where] a village burns down, and then once you're done with that mission you come out of that instance and see the village standing there still – that really ruins it for me. We are definitely avoiding that. We're creating situations that are logically repeatable, that make sense."

The environments are rich with accurate details, from the fishing vessels to the iconic church. Yet the backdrop is also heavy on horror kitsch. A street sign reads 'Arkham Ave', while elsewhere the price of petrol is listed as '$6.66'. Black helicopters circle the island, and in one cutscene a battle-hardened priest declares: "Satan's wearing Kevlar. And Bible-thumping just pisses him off."

But Kingsmouth is just one location in the game. An Egyptian setting has also been announced, and the hub cities for each faction – New York City, Seoul and London – promise contrasting urban feels. The team has teased clothes shops and nightclubs, which brings up another feature: you can play the whole game in hot pants.

"We want the hardcore players to come up with new combos that maybe no one else has thought about"

The character creation aspect of *The Secret World* strives for versatility. With no classes, characters can pursue any skillset – say, offensive fire-based powers – and then change gears and follow another one. Players assemble their powers into two decks, with slots for seven passive abilities and seven active powers. Finding the best mix of powers will keep you competitive, and teammates will learn to combine their abilities for maximum effect.

Tørnquist and Bruusgaard demonstrate this during a battle in a junkyard with golems made of scrap metal, which charge at the group. One character casts a cone of flame; another adds an area-of-effect attack on top of it. Meanwhile, a healer who has triggered a regeneration power on her teammates adds another power that revives them automatically if they fall in battle.

"What we are hoping for is that this will create almost a global think-tank, as players try to come up with new ways of using these



Martin Bruusgaard, lead designer

Ragnar Tørnquist, director and producer



What you wear won't hurt or help your stats, so sporting a garish get-up at a junkyard battle royale is the norm (top). Characters, like the priest (below right), won't judge your fashion sense, either – but they will walk you through the story via mission-specific cinematics

BRISK COMPETITION

Combat in *The Secret World* is expected to be fast-paced. Characters bring up to 14 powers to each encounter, and short recharge times will keep the fireballs flying. An electronic music soundtrack and an interface that resembles an augmented-reality device bring a sci-fi flair, while all the usual looting, battling and ranking of a modern MMOG will make its way into *The Secret World*. Leaderboards will rank individual, cabal (guild) and faction accomplishments. The player-versus-player section of the game features a three-way fight for territory in the game's Hollow Earth region. The winner accrues some benefits back in the normal world – and the losers, ideally, will gang together and strike back.

powers," says Tørnquist. "When it comes to combining different areas and branches in the power pool, that's where we want the hardcore players to come up with new combos that maybe no one else has thought about."

In fact, to hear Tørnquist and Bruusgaard describe it, they want to be all things to all people: casual enough for the beginners, but deep enough for the stat junkies. The player-versus-player areas will offer a significant challenge, as teams of players optimise their builds and combine their attacks – but Tørnquist and Bruusgaard also insist you'll also be able to play through the player-versus-environment missions by themselves with fairly simple decks. For now, they're trying not to alienate a single potential customer.

"*Anarchy Online* had an amazing depth that I think we've gone back to, whereas *Conan* was a little bit more shallow – on purpose, actually – and that was the philosophy of the team," Tørnquist declares.

The Secret World offers complexity, continues Bruusgaard, but: "We're not creating a more hardcore game. It's for longevity."

Players will pick up new or improved powers by spending the experience points they earn during the game, with maybe five per cent of them available only through special quests. With no classes to limit them, players could collect every single power in the game if they're willing to invest the time, and at designated points on the map they can switch from a tank to a healer to a hybrid of both as easily as changing their wardrobe.

On the topic of the wardrobe, while you'll pick up useful loot in the form of jewellery and tattoos, your main garb has no defensive value. Play in a three-piece suit, a flannel shirt and jeans or a tank top and heels: your fashion sense won't affect your skills. "Many players want to be a walking achievement rack," Bruusgaard notes of how other MMOGs are played. Here, you can keep those hot-pink hot pants all the way through the endgame.

Like most MMOGs, *The Secret World* splits its players into warring factions. But these factions aren't just at war with each other: they're united against the evil that's threatening the world – and they're jockeying for position to see who can rule in the aftermath. "It's a gentleman's war, in a way. Everyone understands the necessity of fighting evil," says Tørnquist. "But then when the evil is over, the factions will fight."

Players pick a faction when they roll their character, choosing between the crazed fundamentalists of the Templar; their arch-nemeses, the cold and conquering Illuminati; or the enigmatic Dragon, who make their headquarters in a Buddhist monastery in Seoul. Each faction is dubious in its own way. By doing their bidding, you may save some lives – but you're also advancing a more sinister goal. Even when you're sent to beat back zombies in Kingsmouth, says Tørnquist, "You're not really a hero sent in to save anybody. You're a tool of your faction.

"When you start the game, you face the issue of what does it mean to be a hero in this faction? Are you fighting the good fight? Obviously you are killing bad things, but for what reason? And what does your faction really want? [You're] just part of a huge, huge entity, a huge, secret organisation that's been there for a very long time, and do you really know what they want with the world?"

Along the way, players will meet other groups with different agendas; one, called the Sanctuary Of Secrets, debuted in an alternate-reality game tied to the fiction. Tørnquist explains: "We are introducing other organisations into the game early on – organisations you can't become an official part of, but which will represent a choice, at least on the philosophical level."

Of course, in player-versus-player mode, everyone fights for their own team. The factions face off in a separate region called Hollow Earth, in the lost city of Agartha. This is shaping up to be a fight for territory in the vein of *Dark Age Of Camelot* or *Warhammer Online*, and Tørnquist expects the dynamics of the three-way battle to

Each of the game's factions – the Illuminati, the Templars and the Dragon – run a headquarters like the one seen below. Above: concepts illustrate the nautically themed horrors that swim out of the murk around Solomon Island

Enemies arrive in hefty format even in the early parts of the game, like this tank that charges down the street. On-site research in New England helped the team nail the atmosphere and nuances of a quaint town gone deeply wrong, as well as the local zombie communities

VIRAL FICTION

Funcom has teased *The Secret World* through alternate-reality games, which introduce the game's setting through puzzles, clues, and tinfoil-hatted conspiracies. The site Dark Days Are Coming launched in 2007, followed by an alternate-reality game entitled They Are Coming Back in 2009. This year, a new project introduces the game's Kingsmouth region. The site (monstersofmaine.blogspot.com) teases the local monsters through grainy, unreliable photographs; fictional blogger Tyler Freeborn nestles his evidence in the middle of crazed rants, which also introduce some of the game's characters (who naturally don't believe a word of it). For a tourist's-eye view of the region, visit Kingsmouth.com. The low-budget website introduces the quaint seaside town, before the zombies arrive. The site slips in references to secret tunnels and cursed mountains, and ends with the friendly invitation: "There have been numerous sightings of Bigfoot just outside of town!!"



lead to alliances and betrayals – for example, when the bottom two factions gang up on the leader, and then squabble against each other.

Factions will also compete, covertly, in the regular world. Tørnquist alludes to missions in which you may be called on to raid an opposing faction's territory in search of an artefact, or to pull some kind of a 'prank' on the other side. Like any real-life secret society, the factions sound like a mix of high-stakes politics and schoolboy mischief.

On most missions, however, all those disputes fade away. Everyone is united against evil – like that crab thing you met on the beach – and players from every faction are free to group together as they tackle each region. Here, again, the game is designed to be flexible: why slow down your players with faction politics if they just want to waste some zombies?

More than anything, the game's fiction sets it apart from other MMOGs – but as pop culture, it already feels like well-worn ground. After all, conspiracy theories are nothing new: from The X-Files to the beach-friendly works of Dan Brown, we've long understood that the truth is out there. What's to keep *The Secret World* from turning into a dog's breakfast of the cryptic and conspiratorial? Will players spend hours plumbing its depths only to find out that the Aztecs were chums with the Yeti, and the Mayans painted the Mona Lisa? And in any case, how do you keep secrets in an MMOG, where every time you hit a major plot point you can find someone in chat who knew about it six months ago?

Tørnquist maintains that a strong storyline will tie everything together. He first started sketching out the idea in the '90s, and for the past six years the writing team has developed the fiction and the central story arc. "It's really important to make sure you don't end up with a hodge-podge of ideas. We pretty much looked at everything out there. We know everything at this point. And it's insane!" He laughs as he considers the extremities of his team's efforts. "But we are building a unique central storyline. It sounds like we just sort of copied stuff out of history books, [but] it's a storyline that goes back millions of years. It's inspired by myths and legends, and has universal themes, everything from the creation of this planet to the rise of civilisation, and what's behind the creation of these ancient civilisations, the Egyptians, the Mayans. But that storyline is ours, and it's unique."

Without going as far as to disclose it, Tørnquist adds: "There is a central enemy. There is a central 'big bad' – actually more than one – and there's a big twist there as well." New players will learn the basics of the world – for example, who to hit first – but they'll be encouraged to "dig deeper" to learn more about the faction that enlisted them and the forces that oppose them. The missions will reveal some of the mysteries, but others may appear with minimal explanation beforehand. "There are definitely going to be a lot of clues and embedded narratives and sound narratives and unexplained stories," Tørnquist explains. "There's actually a whole game system around this that we haven't revealed yet."

It's not enough for *The Secret World* to avoid the usual swords'n'sorcery tropes: it has to persuade people that a game about the real world, and the unreal secrets it holds, will be intriguing enough to lead them into a long-term relationship with a new MMORPG. In Kingsmouth, what's most promising isn't the dialogue in the cutscenes or the homage to local horrors, but the atmosphere: you can feel the cold and the encroaching fog, and when the fights start, those monster designs are splendidly twisted. It all feels familiar – but, with any luck, it will also feel new.

"It's a storyline that goes back millions of years. It's inspired by myths and legends, and has universal themes"

A boss monster looking like a cross between Godzilla and a squid poses before a local fishing vessel. Players will have to team up to tackle bosses that stalk the environment, as well as instances


SONY



LIGHTS CAMERA ACTION

SONY'S NEW MOTION-SENSING CONTROLLER IS READY TO ROLL. HOW DOES IT PERFORM?

Doomed to potentially hostile comparisons with the controllers that obviously inspired it, PS3's Move starts strong with just its basic shape. Cylindrical, it speaks in curves rather than angles, inviting you to explore the degrees of freedom that other systems cannot reach. This is not a device built to snap into extenders like steering wheels and fishing rods (though no doubt factories in China and elsewhere are currently readying themselves to churn out precisely such things), implying broader scope and less in the way of obvious games. That, of course, is for its developers to prove.

Built of the same tough plastic as the Sixaxis/DualShock 3 controller and selectively glossy, the main Move controller feels satisfyingly expensive, heavy without feeling like a dumbbell. The button layout, meanwhile, follows the Wii template, with a big button situated at the resting position of your thumb, surrounded by four smaller buttons (each about half the size of regular PS3 joypad buttons) formatted with the familiar PlayStation symbols, and a trigger on the flipside under the index finger. The sub-controller feels just as familiar, charged as it is with the same traditional functions as the Wii Nunchuk.

The ball that sits atop the motion controller, ready for detection by the PlayStation Eye, is soft but not spongy. If you push it, it dents and springs gently back to shape – a bit like one of Phil Harrison's favourite rubber ducks (if they were real). So, if you're going to smash granddad in the face during a heated game of gladiator combat, you know which end to use.



Lead designer Travis Steiner says that it took just two months to patch *SOCOM* with Move controls. Aiming with the pointer feels natural, though pointing offscreen to turn feels as sluggish and counter-intuitive as an early Wii shooter. The sub-controller is surprisingly light and features the buttons from the left half of a DualShock, which will prove a viable, though less ergonomic, one-handed substitute. Face buttons currently reload and throw grenades, but expect simple gestures to be implemented before release

To the camera, the size of this illuminated sphere determines z-axis depth as it moves back and forth, with existing Eye algorithms tracking the user's positional data. The theoretical limit for z-axis detection, then, is the point at which the sphere becomes too small for the Eye to differentiate. Needless to say, that's quite a bit farther from the camera than the distance to your sofa.

Interestingly, the colour of the ball isn't just some crude way of telling players and controllers apart (although it is used for those purposes), or giving marketing designers something to work with. Able to reproduce the full RGB spectrum, which the Eye will duly pick up, the light can assume any colour the developer chooses – a feature that could, to a degree, be passed on to players. It can also flash without breaking the flow of data, creating aesthetic effects such as a muzzle flash if it's being wielded as a firearm, or perhaps to indicate an urgent health warning.

Powering up the PS3 and taking a seat has us scratching our heads: where exactly do we sit? The Wii's Sensor Bar is wide and vague enough to suggest pretty much anywhere, but the chassis of the Eye is narrower and more focused, making you wonder where it's looking. Anywhere within its field of view is considered a playable area, but even that needs a trip through the XMB, to the Eye's calibration screen, to know for sure. In all likelihood, though, once you've seen how it relates to the furniture in your room, you'll never need to check or worry about this again. Binding the controllers to a console, meanwhile, is a breeze, as simple as with a DualShock 3.

IF IT WANTS YOU TO WAVE YOUR ARMS LIKE YOU'RE CLEANING THE HULL OF A BOEING 747, THEN HAVE SOME ANTIPERSPIRANT READY, BECAUSE NO AMOUNT OF WRIST FLICKING WILL FAKE IT

A greater sticking point emerges as the PS3 starts up, and it's all too easy to put your finger on it. Those triggers, designed to match those of a DualShock 3 or Sixaxis, are as loose and sensitive as PS3's other analogue inputs. Much comes down to calibration, of course, but most PS3 owners know what it's like to put the pad down for a break and find their character has other ideas, tossing a grenade as the trigger glances the table/carpet.

In terms of visual feedback, the best anecdotal measure of motion-control



DEMONSTRATION MOVES

Most of the Move games Sony has shown to date feel a little uninspired, but the company's augmented-reality tech demo showed much promise during GDC. Data displaying the exact co-ordinates of the handset's position highlight the hardware's ability to interpret 3D space, while simplistic painting routines show off the accuracy of the pointer. Most impressive, however, is the demo which maps a simplistic avatar on to your torso and uses simple head-tracking to keep it in perspective. Despite spinning and shaking the handset, we couldn't get the Move hardware to do anything but track our flailings flawlessly.

accuracy is a disembodied limb or tool. Sure enough, just like Wii's, the early Move experience involves lots of floating hands, sports equipment and gadgets. And as you flick through menus or ready a serve, what's immediately clear is the advantage of so-called 1:1 mapping. With Wii, even with MotionPlus, you're always aware of the link between console and controller, that unseen piece of elastic that lets you merrily exploit games by wriggling your wrist, and threatens to break if you try anything too vigorous. It's not an extreme sensation, of course, but enough to impose a pattern on how and what you play. If this happens at all with Move, it didn't during our time with it. Your hand, however you choose to move it, is essentially cloned onscreen.

This has little bearing on abstract interfaces like the crosshair in *SOCOM 4*, the only issue with which is a rather counter-intuitive calibration process. The rumble of the motion controller is more intense than the Wii Remote's, and you have the option of swapping the sub-controller for a standard joypad, but that's about all that separates such games from a *Red Steel* or *Resident Evil 4*. Wii is, after all, generally very good at interactions across two axes.

Where Move pulls away – and where it lives up to its name – is when a game decides to test the extremes of movement in 3D space. If it wants you to wave your arms like you're cleaning the hull of a Boeing 747, then have some antiperspirant ready because no amount of wrist flicks will fake it. That 1:1 mapping isn't just about the smallest motions but the biggest, its sensitivity to distance from the Eye a major plus. When Sony talks about plugging a gap in current motion-control schemes, you can see where it's coming from.

There's also a lot to be said for motion control in HD, not just in the Eye's precision but the thing people like to forget: the actual game you're controlling. When you look at *EyePet*, which Move improves with everything from crayons to the control of virtual hairdryers, what grabs you is still the performance of the pet itself, its brow furrowing and hair bristling as it follows your every action. The most attractive element of Move might actually be one you're already used to, then: the emerging power of the console it's plugged into.

Doubtless there are many studios currently hard at work translating their most successful Wii projects to work with Move, but naturally the games that will use it most effectively will be those built around it from the ground up – and Sony has 20 teams of its own dedicated to creating such titles. That's more than can be said for Microsoft, but the differences between Move and Natal clearly don't stop at dedicated software staffing levels. In the absence of a dedicated handheld component, Natal is actually a much riskier proposition than Wii was once upon a time, offering – literally – fewer handholds for those looking to make the transition from controller-driven to controller-less gaming.

In attempting to lure a broader userbase to Xbox 360 with Natal, is Microsoft pushing too far? While Sony has proved how the likes of *SOCOM 4* translate to Move, so far Microsoft has shown nothing that demonstrates a practical translation of an existing game format in Natal form (pretending to hold a steering wheel in a driving game by holding your hands out in front of you doesn't count as practical – at least not after hours of play).

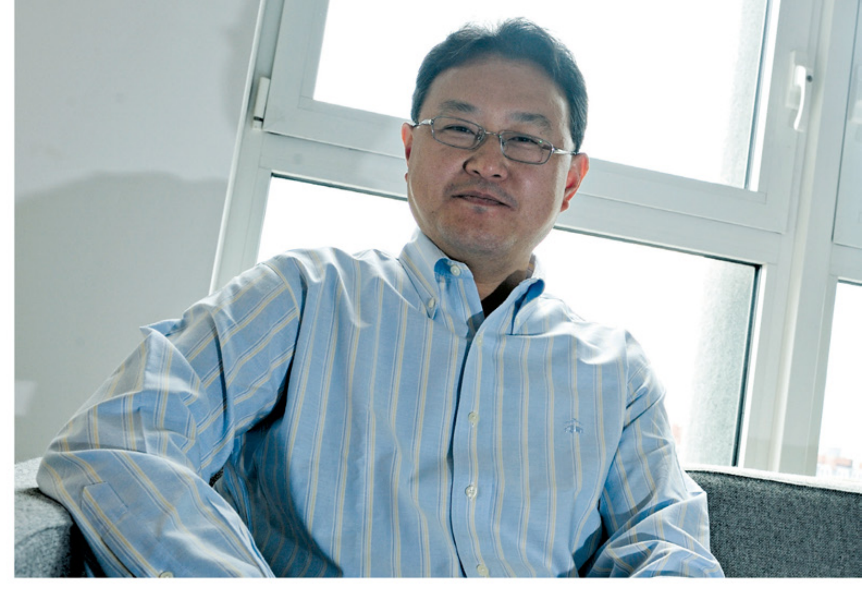
Furthermore, while Sony's hardware is finalised and in the hands of developers, we understand that studios working on Natal projects are currently wrestling with unfinished versions of Microsoft's motion-sensing tech, leading to performance issues. Getting the system to successfully and consistently differentiate between a user and the furniture in the user's environment is apparently providing concerns, while the pre-production hardware's microphone tech is also said to be delivering results that are far from perfect, which is creating headaches in the testing process. The issue of lag hasn't gone away, either. Microsoft is said to be in the process of addressing all of these problems, with fixes set for the next iteration of its development hardware. Natal will launch by Christmas, remember.

By iterating on its own work and taking cues from Nintendo, Sony is playing things more safely than Microsoft. It's also in a better position than both of its competitors to appeal to hobbyist gamers. Its Move hardware works, and it works convincingly. All that's left now is the slightly tricky business of making brilliant games to show what it can really do.



IN CONTROL

PS3'S MOTION-DRIVEN FUTURE ACCORDING TO THE MAN IN CHARGE OF SONY'S WORLDWIDE STUDIOS



Shuhei Yoshida (right) has faced a few challenges since taking up his role as head of Sony's internal game production, but Move looks to be his most engaging one to date. We caught up with him following the hardware's proper debut at GDC.

How long had Sony been preparing for the presentation that was given during GDC?
You know, to be honest, we were hoping we could have it at the last TGS, but we felt that it needed a little bit more polish to finalise it to the level we wanted. So we passed on TGS except for some behind-closed-doors demos. So, to answer your question, it's since E3 last year.

When you say polish, do you mean in terms of games, or the hardware itself?
The base technology. The games were to show that the technology works for many types of games, and many different teams were testing the hardware for different purposes and giving feedback to the hardware team in Japan. There were long lists of issues on the early hardware.

What was the inspiration for the controller?
The sphere was the key. This has to be seen to be perfectly round from every angle, so we wanted to design the hardware to accommodate that biggest symbol of the controller. Also, it had to have a shape that fits in the hand and not be easily thrown, so we gave it this concave design. At the same time, we added a button – we're calling it the 'Action' button now, but the names aren't finalised. Because you are moving your arms and we wanted to grow the audience of PS3 we wanted to have one big button, and still keep the PlayStation symbol buttons for games like *SOCOM 4*.

With which iterations of the technology were the games that were presented during GDC developed?
The software teams have been working with the technology since the beginning of last year. We've tried many different technologies, but it was at the beginning of last year that we decided to go with this optical technology. We've put many years of R&D into it, from EyeToy to PlayStation Eye, along with the sensors in the controllers, which are more advanced than what we have in Sixaxis.

What do you think are Move's benefits over competing motion-control systems?
Well, we don't know about Natal yet, so all we can say from watching in a general sense how it plays is that we've been familiar with the controller-less system since the days of the EyeToy. That's very accessible, so a two-year-old to an 80-year-old lady can play games. But we also know the limitations of making games without a controller. So I'm very curious as to how Microsoft will solve that issue. Compared to Wii and Wii MotionPlus, the biggest advantage is precision, not only movement but 3D spatial recognition and orientation. We can incorporate very subtle movement into games. We've demonstrated *Sports Champions*' table tennis – it's a very simple game, but we made it so that it's very deep, so that you can put those subtle moves in, or reach into the table or step back. That's not possible with the Wii system.

"COMPARED TO WII, THE ADVANTAGE IS PRECISION, NOT ONLY MOVEMENT BUT 3D SPATIAL RECOGNITION AND ORIENTATION. WE CAN INCORPORATE VERY SUBTLE MOVEMENT INTO GAMES"

What was the biggest challenge the Move project has faced to bring it to this stage?
We had a very clear idea of the level of precision, reliability and responsiveness it should have, so it would have the same properties as using a DualShock. We really wanted this to be the case for all motion games – we didn't want to sacrifice or compromise any responsiveness, because that's the key for game development. That was one challenge. The other was how precise and stable it was. We want to make you feel like you're inside the game and holding something that's in the game, not a controller. In order for you to believe in that, the technology has to work precisely, so that's been a challenge for both the hardware and software teams.

***LittleBigPlanet* will be retrofitted to support Move – will other titles get the same fix?**
We showed *EyePet* and *SOCOM 4*, which was pretty complete but we wanted to try to incorporate Move. It was not very difficult to do that to already complete technology. It takes only a very small fraction of hardware resources so Zipper could do that without compromising framerate or graphics, or AI or physics. So it's the full *SOCOM* experience. That's really great news for us. As more publishers try it, I'm sure we'll be surprised how many games will support Move.

Nintendo had smashed TVs at Wii's launch – how are you guarding against similar issues when Move arrives?
What's good about the sphere is that it's very, very robust. It's much more robust in terms of protection for the controller and people around it because it's soft. So we don't need a sleeve.

What sort of resources do you currently have dedicated to Move within SCE?
We have more than 20 teams working on Move.

What's the split of your focus between making Move an effort to appeal to a wider consumer base, and about making traditional games work in a different way?
I would say 50:50.

Move has been presented as a 'hardcore' experience – can you define that experience? And how will you be marketing its appeal to hardcore audiences?
The precision of the Move system allows game designers to create games as simulations and games with much more depth than other motion-based game experiences. We are sure that hardcore gamers will appreciate and enjoy the challenge, with a much finer control over how they interact with the game and achieve greater success in those games. It was very interesting to hear comments by a certain journalist who tried *Sports Champions*' table tennis, who clearly enjoyed playing the game but complained about the lack of perceived one-to-one control at certain times. During the GDC event we were showing the game's entry-level mode, which includes a lot of assists to ensure that everyone who plays the game for the first time can enjoy it. However, we plan to have in the final game a more simulation-





The symbol which features on what Shuhei Yoshida currently calls the 'Action' button is said to be a hangover from the hardware's codename, Arc. The remainder of the package, delivered with the type of sleek robustness long associated with Sony's gaming hardware, doesn't feel anything like a compromise, however. Both the main Move device and the sub-controller tether to the PS3 console in order to charge their batteries, and carry what is said to be considerable charge. If the devices seem large, that's probably because you're mentally scaling up from their buttons, which in reality are much smaller than those used on traditional PS3 controllers

based mode, which will allow expert users to really try out their skills. That promises to be a hardcore experience.

Peter Dille, SCEA's senior vice president of marketing, said that Sony sees Move as an upgrade for Wii owners – how are you planning to communicate that message?
That's really a question for our marketing people. We are targeting the current PS3 users, friends and family members of current PS3 users as well as new users looking to buy a PS3 for the first time. Having games on Move that cater to a broader audience will help appeal to those who are looking for a system that offers something to everyone in the family.

None of the games presented so far feels absolutely novel – is it a case now of presenting the broadly familiar to acquaint the public with Move before presenting more overtly different games?
We are working on variety of games, and it tends to be the case that more familiar concepts progress quicker than novel ones. We have some exciting announcements still to come and hopefully they will help answer your question.

Will you be forging new game types using Move in the way Nintendo has with Wii?
We strive to do so. We have been deeply involved in the development of Move itself, by providing ideas, prototype games and feedback to SCEI and SCEA R&D – Rick Marks' group who worked on the software system. It is our responsibility to show what Move can do and provide reference to third parties. However, thirdparty developers have been working on Wii games for some time, and it may be the case that ideas they had that could not be achieved on Wii could be accomplished by Move because of our technology and features. If this is the case, then I am sure we will see great ideas coming from thirdparty developers as well.

MAKING SENSE

PICKING THROUGH SOME OF THE MORE TECHY TOPICS WITH A MAN CLOSE TO THE DEV COMMUNITY

While credit for the development of Move goes to SCEA's R&D group, its European partner is just as instrumental when it comes to developer relations. As head of developer services, **Kish Hirani** (right) leads engineers whose "sole mission" is to help studios get the best out of PlayStation platforms, from PS2 developers based in India to the future of motion control.



In technical terms, what does Move offer over Natal and MotionPlus?
With Natal, the difficult bit is that, unless you can tell me more details about it, it's only what we've seen. Everyone knows what it is as a product. The key bit for Move is the z-axis. It's got a gyro, it's got a magnetometer, as well as accelerometers. The first two you'll be familiar with from Sixaxis. Combined, they give you six degrees of freedom, so you've got pitch and roll, which is difficult for the competitors to detect.

The technology on the light itself is nothing new or innovative – you've probably seen it in motion-capture studios; same concept. PS3, as you know, launched with a lot of stuff about image processing, which is what the Cell processor's designed for. That's where the bonus comes in for us, because as the image is being picked up on the camera, that processing's being done on SPUs. So your PPU [equivalent to a PC's CPU] is completely free. You want the controller to be using minimum processor time so the developers can use it for a game.

The whole system is designed for the way you want to use it. So, you can design where you want the jobs spread according to SPUs and so on, which is why you hear these comments about people not yet exploiting the power of PS3. It's purely from that factor: who wants to balance the tasks where. This is a controller designed not to disrupt any of that.

"I CAN DEFINITELY SEE MYSELF PLAYING SOCOM ALL THE WAY THROUGH WITH A MOTION CONTROLLER. SO THAT'S AN EXCITING MARKET I DON'T THINK ANYONE'S TAPPED INTO"

How proactive are the teams using Move? Not every PS3 developer jumped at the chance to use Sixaxis tilt.
I guess we're in the field where everyone knows what the competition – let's just say Wii – is doing, so the first comment is always: "Oh, right, it's another Wii, another 2D plane grab." But as soon as we've cracked that, we usually don't hear much from them, then they ask you to come over and see a demo they've done. As programmers, as soon as they plug these things into the devkits, it throws in all the sensors. As soon as a tiny movement is going through, or the accelerometer's triggered, it picks up in the code. So we've had some amazing demos. Another thing I'm in charge of is tools and middleware, where we've got AiLive LiveMove, which people have been using for Wii games. And that picks up gestures, etc, and is where all the input algorithms are generated. It's a very successful product and everyone's using it, so we gave them this controller and they said: "Great, we can us this. We could actually enhance it." And so they've released LiveMove 2.

How relevant, do you think, is Move to traditional gaming markets?
As a hardcore gamer, I would play those traditional games but I wouldn't finish them on PS3 – I'd go back to PC because I like the mouse and keyboard. When the firstperson shooter jumped on to console – and it's something we only really jumped on to in this console generation – everyone hoped people would start hooking up a mouse and keyboard and start playing. But then they said: "Wait a minute, gamepads already work". What's exciting for me is that I can definitely see myself playing *SOCOM* all the way through with a motion controller, especially in singleplayer. So that's an exciting market I don't think anyone's tapped into.

Haven't players found that pads strike a balance between accuracy and exertion?
Well, we've kind of solved that problem by having the secondary controller. If you play *SOCOM 4*, it'll probably answer your question; all it's doing is using the motion controller for what you'd normally use a mouse for. It's a very personal thing, but I don't think I'll make that move back to PC now because I've never found a controller that easy for firstperson shooters, or especially RTS games.



















Rather than going for a *Wii Sports*-style vibe with its characters, the game adopts a style that brings to mind the denizens of Home, reflecting its bid for a realistic vibe



SPORTS CHAMPIONS

Of *Champions*' minigames, table tennis feels technically superior to *Wii Sports Resort*'s offering, though the increased depth perception means it isn't as instantly accessible. Gladiator Duel is one of the most intuitive experiences: the camera angle shifts behind your avatar at the start of each round, allowing one-to-one control during fights while using gestures for jumps and special moves.

MOTION FIGHTER

Despite the title, this is actually a gesture-based experience, not mapped 1:1 with your movements, which means it isn't the most extensive Move game shown to date. For a 20-per-cent-complete game it's reasonably responsive, though, and it features the most distinctive art style of the current crop.





Holding the Action button on one Move controller and the trigger on the other while making a headlock motion instigates a 'dirty' move. Right now, though, the meat of the combat needs polish

MOVE PARTY

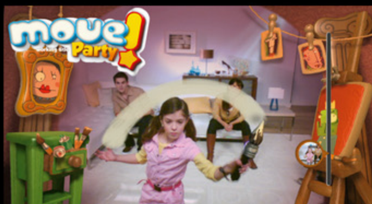
Even though it consists of swatting bugs, shaving monsters and popping puffer fish, *Move Party* will feel oddly familiar to anyone who got their hands on early PS Eye games. That said, the increased accuracy causes less frustration than Sony's prior attempts at motion tracking. It also shows off the PS Eye's extra functions, capturing a portrait and soundbite for each player pre-game.



Move Party is a turn-taking affair that supports four players but requires just one controller – we suspect it'll come bundled with Move in some regions













Superstars features four flavours of show ranging from Japanese humiliation to the more standardised cookery format. The initial face detection is quick and accurate

TV SUPERSTARS

Another case of style over substance? You paste your head on a virtual avatar which you then dress up, but *Superstars'* minigames (perform sweeping gestures to dance) feel strained. Do well at them and you'll acquire fame, climaxing as your avatar gets to the dizzying heights of a mock Heat magazine cover. Just like most firstparty Wii titles, it flows other users' avatars into the background.



THE SHOOT

The spawn of *Ghost Squad* and *Viewtiful Joe*, *The Shoot* tasks you with clearing film sets of cutout targets by aiming the pointer and hammering the trigger. Simple gestures, and full body motions such as spinning around, trigger special moves, while shifting from side to side dodges. Despite the PS Eye extras, limited graphics and clunky pacing make it feel dated.









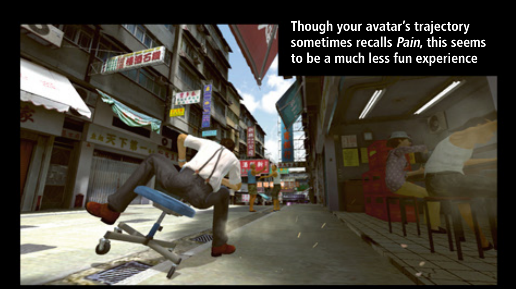


Targeting and trigger-mashing works as well as in a Wii game, but *The Shoot*'s gestures feel a little gimmicky

SLIDER

A distinctly leftfield effort from Japan, *Slider* is all about hurtling through environments on an office chair. Our (admittedly brief) time with the game revealed not a lot to get excited about, its waggle-centric control system bringing to mind a middling Wii effort.

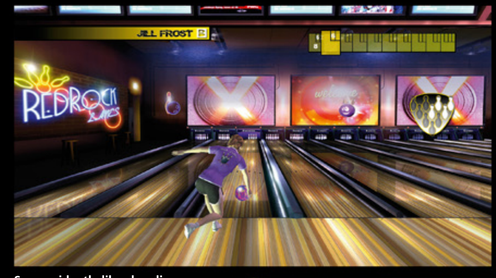
Though your avatar's trajectory sometimes recalls *Pain*, this seems to be a much less fun experience





BRUNSWICK PRO BOWLING

This might blatantly copy *Wii Sports*' bowling control scheme, but it still won't raise an eyebrow at Nintendo HQ. It's a pre-alpha build, but feels characterless and uses the least intuitive gesture-based controls we've had our hands on. The first Move shovelware?



Sony evidently likes bowling games, but *Brunswick Pro* seems unlikely to usurp Nintendo's spin on the sport



John Vec

The PopCap co-founder on Facebook friends lists, having $20 million spending money, and running his studio like Kentucky Fried Chicken

Don't say that PopCap is one of the world's leading developers of casual games. For a start, the company hates the C-word. And besides, its massive success at producing games that apparently effortlessly appeal to both broad audiences and committed gamers has made it one of the highest-selling developers in gaming history. Not bad for a company that, ten years ago, was testing its games on one of its three founders' mothers. We meet **John Vechey**, one of those founders and now executive producer of online games, to talk about where PopCap came from, where it's heading, and just what it takes to make a game capable of selling 50 million copies.

Did you know what you were getting into when you first set up PopCap?
We didn't know what we were getting into. We started the company as more of a lifestyle company. We wanted to make the games we wanted to make – fun, simple games that were also compelling – and it kind of got out of hand! Now we have 250 people, with seven international offices – I went to our Christmas party and I looked around and thought, 'What the hell? How did this happen?' It was never part of our plan to go big or go fast. We didn't have any investors, it was just about making great games and doing a good job of it.

Was it easy to set up the company using such an apparently unplanned approach?
We had consultants come in and they kept asking: "What's your mission statement?" And we'd be like: "Make great games!" And they'd say that wasn't a mission statement. We thought those guys had more experience than us, so we had to listen to them – it took us a while to realise that making great games was just what we wanted to be doing.

Did the lack of that official mission statement impede your progress?
Not in the early days because there were just three founders with a good partnership that auto-balanced itself. So when we were young, not having a mission statement was fine. When you get a CEO you have to start thinking more about the vision of your company in a more purposeful way. When there's 250 people, you can't assume that everyone can have a lot of conversations with the founders and the CEO. I think we need to start thinking about that a little more.

> "It was never part of our plan to go big or fast. We didn't have any investors, it was just about making great games and doing a good job of it"

Why have you set up several separate studios rather than having one big one?
Mainly because of people. George Fan, the guy who did *Plants Vs Zombies*, didn't want to leave the Bay Area. The Vancouver studio deals with hidden-object games, and thinks differently to our core Seattle studio. Dublin's focus was mobile and now we have a game designer there. And in Shanghai they're adapting our games for the Asian market. So it revolves around people and games.

You set up in 2002, in the aftermath of the dotcom crash, to make online games. Did you see an opportunity there?
We're not really an internet company, so we didn't think like that. We were starting a game company. Pogo and MSN Games were making a lot of mediocre games because it was a new technology. For the first time, you could go to a web page and play a game. Brian [Fiete, co-founder] and I had expertise from working at an internet division of Sierra, while Jason [Kapalka, co-founder] had designed the first Pogo games. We had the idea of making games for everybody, and when we first started doing it, it seemed like a new business model.

Like an update of the shareware system?
When we first launched the downloadable version of *Bejeweled*, we didn't think people would pay more than five dollars for a game they could get for free, but someone convinced us to charge $20. We were making $15,000-$16,000 a month in game licensing fees and launched *Bejeweled* just on our website, and it did $35,000 in the first month. Jason was our pessimist, always thinking the next month would be back to zero. But then it would be $40,000! It kept going like that.

That wasn't the model you had in mind?
No, we were just trying to license our games. When the dotcom market crashed licensees didn't want to pay us any more, and players wanted an offline version because online fees were high.

So PopCap was founded on economic strife and undeveloped technology?
Yes! Plus a little bit of luck. I don't think we



hey

Over PopCap's ten-year history, Vechey has acted as CEO, run PopCap.com and launched *Bejeweled Blitz*, which has counted 25 million players since its launch in December 2008

would think of it nowadays, so it was a very good thing that modems existed and nobody wanted to pay any money. We almost did some work-for-hire jobs, but luckily we never did. There were a lot of things that would have tanked us if we'd done them.

Since the casual gaming market exploded, has the model changed?
The market has got a lot broader for us. When you look at *PVZ*, Steam can run a sale, but we won't be doing so on PopCap.com, and we'll do something different, like release an iPhone version. All these aspects merge and mesh and when we invest in new IP like *PVZ* we can put it across other platforms and use the core game to add more things to it – we're not redesigning gameplay, so it's a lot cheaper. From a business standpoint, no one game on any specific platform can make or break us because we're so multiplatform.

Would you say PopCap's fortunes are based on *Bejeweled*'s success?
Bejeweled's success has led us on to every platform, and we've got retail because of it, so it kind of leads the charge. It's got the name recognition and makes it easier for people to see what else we do. It's like: "We've got the number two best-selling mobile game, and here are three other games!"

But its apparent simplicity must help players to engage with it, too.
Yeah. Take *Tetris* – a pretty amazing game, but it doesn't work on most platforms any more.

You only want to play *Tetris* with the old Nintendo controller or the DS – you don't want to play it with a mouse or a touchscreen. *Bejeweled* is really adaptable and the controls are pretty simple. It works on so many input devices – that's its advantage.

Did you have a feel for *Bejeweled*'s fate when Kapalka first set out its design?
The strange thing was some people argued it wasn't even a game, which was kind of weird. But even once it started getting popular I didn't foresee its success, especially a ten-year anniversary with it still selling well. So we didn't have that big vision to take *Bejeweled* everywhere.

Do gaming portals have the same importance as they used to?
I don't think so. Right now they're fighting for the same customers and they do kind of a bad job of it. The growth in the casual gaming industry is not coming from MSN Games or RealArcade or Big Fish Games. It's coming from new game companies like Zynga and Playfish – from companies who are trying to get out there where the customer is, not just sitting there saying: "Oh, customer, come to me". To succeed they need to do something new.

But do you still get much out of selling games through portals?
We make more money selling a game at retail than at $20 on the portals. A big retailer who gets the customers in and has boxes on the shelves does way more for us, and we get more money per unit.

What is PopCap's reach today?
One of our top franchise games will appeal to 98 per cent of the population, except 60 per cent of that population doesn't know if it likes games. Gamers are getting more mature, which is really helping, but we still need to get to people who aren't looking to play games.

Do you think that all games should be social games nowadays?
There's not a single game I play that I wouldn't enjoy more if there was some kind of connectivity to the social graph. I think right now there's a difference between social games and social aspects of games, like high scores. And I think in the next few years there's going to be less of a difference, and I think it's going to span all platforms. You can play *Bejeweled Blitz* on Facebook and then you can get on the Tube and play it on your iPhone and it's the same high score list and friends list, which is really cool. I can't think of a game I wouldn't want to play with my friends, except for maybe *Pachinko Sexy Reaction*. That would be embarrassing.

How did the process work when you were taking *Bejeweled Blitz* to Facebook?

"I can't think of a game I wouldn't want to play with my friends, except for maybe Pachinko Sexy Reaction. That would be embarrassing"



It took a lot of tweaking. We didn't want it to be skill-based so we made it more luck-based. We spent a lot of time tweaking how the multipliers work to make sure that it was just lucky enough, but you never felt like you were just rolling a slot machine; we tried to get that perfect balance. We're constantly trying to add features as well, to try and make it more engaging, and fix certain problems – basically improve it, right? But if it's not intuitive and easy to play, it's the wrong choice. So we've had a lot of ideas that we didn't follow up. And we've spent lots of time on the UI, because social games are 90 per cent about the UI.

How long did you spend developing it?
It was a two-month project using a customer service guy who taught himself Flash. But there's been a team working on it non-stop since then.

This is the first game you've developed that's constantly updated on the same platform. Has that had an effect?
Yes. It completely has changed the culture on the team. It's still PopCap but it's taken a different mindset. I said at a recent conference that doing social games is more like running Kentucky Fried Chicken than it is like making a game like *PVZ*. It's much more about the operations, the ongoing service, the constant tweaks. The core gameplay isn't different – it has to be as simple as possible and then you can add to it later. You can't make a social game in three years and then release it. You learn a lot about the process just by putting it out there.

So you came into the business wanting to make great games, but now you're making great systems. Have you enjoyed that change?
It's different but it's still gratifying. Last year, 30 million people played *Bejeweled* – that's pretty rad. I think it would've been frustrating if that was the only business model that existed and gameplay didn't matter – I think then I'd be cursing. But luckily we've proven that gameplay stands out, and that will happen more and more.

Do you see Facebook as a long-term platform in its own right?
I'm very pro-Facebook. I never want to make a friends list again. I'd be happy if we banned all friends lists except Facebook's. I hate making friends lists in games. Take *League Of Legends* – I was playing for three weeks until I found out some of my friends had been playing! So I welcome the Facebook overlords.

How much more scope do iPhone and iPod Touch have for new forms of play?
I don't think there's that many companies doing a great job on iPhone. Arguably we've done an OK job, but we don't really use the device in a



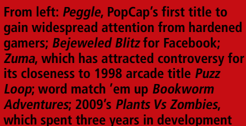


special way. *Flight Control* does something like that, but I think there's a lot more innovation to be done, and we might create new IP for it at our Dublin studio. We'll be a little more experimental. But iPhone is not necessarily the exemplar of future gaming.

When Apple announced its iPad, did you feel at all overwhelmed in the sense that it was yet another platform that you'd need to support?
We're stoked about iPad. I think that is a need that nobody knows they have. So I'm excited and I think it's going to be a great gaming platform. I want to see an RTS game that just feels awesome! I don't think we'll make it, but I can't wait for someone else to.

There's no danger of PopCap being overstretched, then.
If we were doing original IP on every platform, I'd shoot myself. It wouldn't be workable. But we can pick, say, PC, make something, get the momentum and the marketing and the press to see it's a great game. We have no risk putting *PVZ* on iPhone. It's not that expensive because there's no three-year dev cycle. So, for us, the more platforms, the merrier. It fuels our business and separates us from a company like EA.

You recently received a big injection of venture capital cash – what will you be spending it on?
I'm still trying to figure out what the overall strategy is. I'm talking with lots of different companies, social and mobile. But we're always on the lookout for talented game developers. We can use our own IP, so it's more about finding people. We only publish our own games, so it's all about the people. And I've got $20 million to spend on it – awesome!



From left: *Peggle*, PopCap's first title to gain widespread attention from hardened gamers; *Bejeweled Blitz* for Facebook; *Zuma*, which has attracted controversy for its closeness to 1998 arcade title *Puzz Loop*; word match 'em up *Bookworm Adventures*; 2009's *Plants Vs Zombies*, which spent three years in development



START YOUR REVENGE
THE GAME IS JUST THE START.
WHEN THE GODS BETRAYED YOU, THEY TOOK EVERYTHING YOU HAD. NOW IT'S TIME TO TAKE IT BACK. START TAKING THEIR LIVES, START TAKING THEIR POWERS AND START TAKING THEM DOWN, ONE GOD AT A TIME. GOD OF WAR 3, THE EPIC, BONE-SHREDDING CONCLUSION TO THE TRILOGY. START YOUR RAGE. START YOUR REVENGE.
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UNDER SIEGE

HOW CAPCOM MADE ONE OF THE FINEST GAMES OF THE LAST DECADE FROM LEFTOVER BITS OF A MOULDERING FRANCHISE

Next to the mainstream impact of *GTAIII* and *WOW*, the pushing of interactive boundaries in *Half-Life 2*, or the AI brilliance and defining mechanics of *Halo*, *Resident Evil 4* may seem a small thing. It's an action game in a schlocky setting with monsters and guns, as well as a plot centred on saving the president's daughter. Doubtless those who think the point of discussing games is to assert cultural legitimacy cringe at the whole B-movie feel. Exploding heads, relentlessly savage combat and an all-American hero parachuted in to sort things out – is this really what we should be championing?

If you care about craftsmanship, intricately balanced mechanics, magnificent combat and videogames' greatest ever implementation of rollicking pace, then yes. And if you care about games being games rather than ticking off points from other media, then yes too. Frankly, if you value entertainment: yes. *Resident Evil 4* isn't a manifesto, but it is a shining example of a world in which every interaction has an equal and opposite reaction, where the player character's capabilities dictate every situation, and where you learn to use tools rather than hammer a nail repeatedly.

As seems to be a theme among our games of the decade, this was not the product of an easy development. The task wasn't a simple one. The *Resident Evil* series suffered an even crueller fate than any of the minor characters gutted in its survival-horror prime: it grew old. Those prerendered backgrounds, once so opulent, felt more and more restrictive as 3D environments matured. Its game-lengthening fetch quests looked suspiciously like crude time-filling. By the time of *Resident Evil 3* and, later, *Code: Veronica*, its combat almost felt pedestrian, the suspense dissipated by the same tricks too many times. Experienced players literally ignored the zombies.

Resident Evil was about intricate world design and shuffling threats, a sinister place that was half puzzler and half horror. *RE4* looked enviously at other ways the thirdperson genre could go and attempted several, its development involving a succession of abandoned prototypes, partially developed full games and even the first *Devil May Cry*.

Into the maelstrom, enter director **Shinji Mikami**. "I wasn't there right from the beginning; I came in after it had been started," is his diplomatic dismissal of earlier versions. "Basically, as Capcom's head of development at the time I was given an instruction: to change the series altogether." Mikami didn't just have a mandate: he had total control. "Outside of that instruction, I was given every freedom in how I wanted to recreate it. And that's why *Resident Evil 4* is the game it is."

RE4 is the game that streamlined or junked everything from its legacy, creating a new template and setting the standard for the thirdperson action adventure. "*Resident Evil* was a horror game," says Mikami, "but when


The first Ganado you meet seems human from behind. Which makes his snarling, bug-eyed attack when he notices you all the scarier


One of the first little mysteries you come across is a dog stuck in a bear trap. Release it, and when you come to El Gigante your kindness is repaid



Your first chance to observe the Ganados isn't reassuring, as they go about their labour while burning the corpse of a policeman


Dr Salvador is *RE4*'s iconic enemy, and the rasp of his snarling chainsaw in the midst of a pack of Ganados has ruined many a pair of pants

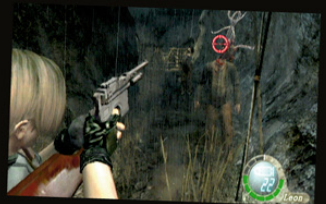
TITLE: **RESIDENT EVIL 4**
FORMAT: **GC, PC, PS2, WII**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

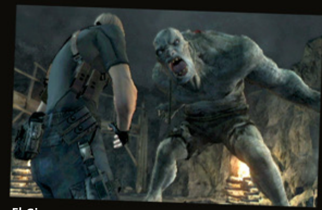


In a reversal of expectations, you rescue Ashley fairly early in the adventure, and have to guard her through extended sections of the game



Travelling across a lake on a boat, Leon's attacked by a half-crocodile, half-Jaws creature that has to be pin-cushioned with harpoons before it goes down


Headshot a Ganado and it can explode into something nastier. One of three types of parasite randomly bursts out, complicating crowd scenes


El Gigante might just be *RE4*'s standout boss. Big and nasty and scary, he's a mindless bully. Luckily, you've brought a shotgun to play with


One chainsaw-wielding maniac not enough? Try two sisters, swathed in blood-encrusted bandages, running full pelt for your neck in an enclosed space

I started with *RE4* we decided to lessen that aspect and make it more of an action game. That was one of the two biggest changes." It chose survival over horror. The game is an escalating fight from start to finish, crammed with top-class action beats and one-off sideshows, relentlessly adding to and remixing its brilliant underlying mechanics.

Underscoring everything are the basic enemies – and their warped humanity. "This was the other big decision: changing the zombies for something closer to human beings," says Mikami. The Ganados are introduced with expert cinematography, a two-second snatch from a firstperson perspective watching Leon approach the first building in the game before you enter. Inside is a man tending a fireplace, who responds to Leon's questioning with gesticulations and angry words in a foreign tongue. He suddenly swings an axe, and you're fighting face to face, his eyes locked on yours. The first time, every player wildly empties a clip. The living are scarier than the undead.

A motor starts, and the two local police who'd brought you here are gone. More Ganados gather outside, talking urgently to each another. You're trapped and alone, and you've been playing for one minute. The Ganados are revealed in sparing details: you soon come across a village, and observe them through binoculars tending hay, pushing wheelbarrows and busying themselves. In their midst is the body of one of the policemen who drove you here – staked through the chest and burning on a pyre. Mikami and the *RE4* team didn't just make their enemies human on the surface, they burrowed down into a defining characteristic: co-operation. The Ganados are not individual enemies. They're a mob.

"I don't feel traumatised by crowds of people normally," laughs Mikami. "But I think everyone can relate to the idea that crowds of people can be very scary – if, for example, they turn against you." The Ganados talk to each other, shout at you, advance unerringly, and if a group gets close they'll beat you down one after the other, blindsiding your aim, grabbing your arms and bullying you to death.

To tackle them, *RE4* pioneered and perfected a new view: a perspective with Leon's body off-centre for movement, and a zooming over-the-shoulder camera for aiming. The key addition was the ability to free-aim, allied to location-specific damage and context-sensitive moves: what had been a single horizontal axis of targets in previous *Resident Evil*s was now a full screen of vulnerable extremities. This was the crux of the new combat system, allowing the player to combo: you can stagger an enemy, then roundhouse kick them, simultaneously clearing space. The

"I THINK EVERYONE CAN RELATE TO THE IDEA THAT CROWDS CAN BE VERY SCARY – IF, FOR EXAMPLE, THEY TURN AGAINST YOU"



TANK YOU

A controversial series legacy are the 'tank' controls for basic movement which, when allied to the tightly wound environments, can sometimes feel restrictive. "Fact is," says Mikami, "they're an element of the game. And one I feel is crafted to a very high standard." His point is strengthened by the fact that, for all that the controls are a little ornery, the thought only occurs at quiet moments – and *RE4* has few of those. "Perhaps the hurdle was too high for the change from horror to action," muses Mikami. "Perhaps it didn't work so well in that respect. But from a game design point of view, I think they're as good as was possible."


The fight with Chief Mendez is great in itself, but the setup – an isolated barn, jammed with junk and flaming barrels – is also inspired


When you've burned him a little, Mendez morphs into insectoid form, with a distended spine. Destroy his legs and he keeps coming via chitinous arms


On your way out, the penultimate attempt to stop you is simple: a truck. You've got to blast through the windows or throw a flash grenade


The last-ditch attempt to stop you? Every Ganado they can find. Holed up in a shack with Luis, you have to hold off an onslaught



arcade touch is making your attack animations invincible, tempting reckless charges with crowd-dominating rewards. As you're getting more familiar with the combat system's make-up, it's expanding and ever-changing.

Like with Ashley. Just when you've got used to playing on the offensive, you rescue the president's daughter and then have to try and escape with her. Enemies now try to attack and grab her, too, so you're constantly clawing them back rather than running to a new spot, conscious that she's neither as speedy nor durable as Leon. *RE4* plays with this dynamic, mercilessly using Ashley as bait while you scramble to keep groups from crowding you both, and sneaky enemies dragging her away.

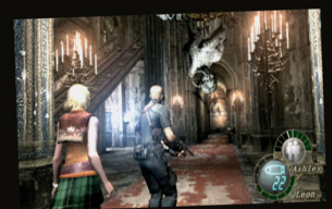
This stretch of the game has its own particular set-pieces, rooms in which Ashley and Leon are separated and Los Illuminados have to be kept at bay while fighting for your own skin, and one bravura flourish where in the space of a minute you're trapped in a room with a spiked ceiling dropping lower, only to escape into a corridor where Ashley becomes trapped with a drill ploughing towards her. She's a constant presence in a game based on saving her, whether she's driving a rumbling JCB through Ganados or working controls while you keep enemies at bay.

You even take control of Ashley in a brief moment reminiscent of *Silent Hill*, a creepy digression that briefly abandons the combat in favour of quick shocks and chills. In terms of her character Ashley is little more than a damsel in distress, but as an element of the design she's much more: another variable in combat, a target to be defended, and a tangible symbol of progression.

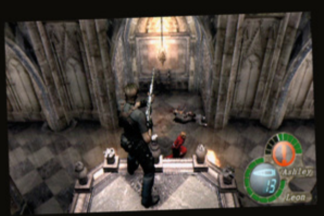
That *Resident Evil 4* can take such risks with its core play is again down to the Ganados and, later, the cultish Los Illuminados. Their AI may not be hugely complex, but it's based on sound principles: small spaces, relentless onward approach, the ability to throw, dodge, follow you anywhere, and guard themselves. Whether you trace that lineage through *Pac-Man*,



Entering the castle grounds, the basic enemies are now Los Illuminados, and once again you get the opportunity to observe their routines


The interior of the castle is as beautiful as it is bizarre, opulence mixing with extreme bad taste and an awful lot of red furnishings


The miserable insects Salazar releases into the sewers are near-invisible, athletic, and their main attack involves pinning Leon's arms. Shotgun!


When Ashley falls into a trap, you have to shoot the shackles and then hold off an onslaught of Los Illuminados as they try to whisk her away


Now collaborating with a number of studios, Shinji Mikami worked as director of *Resident Evil 4* within Capcom

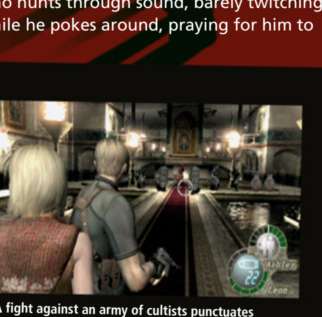
Robotron 2084 or *Resident Evil*, it's clearly at a peak here. The enemies are crafted for the environments, and at home in them. Ganados begin as mobs on the ground: soon you're fighting them on rooftops, kicking down ladders; you're hearing a chainsaw rev, knowing the crowd will hide its user; they're throwing explosives; all of a sudden their heads are exploding into deadly parasites; they're behind you. When Ganados are replaced by Los Illuminados, there are new tricks: bowmen, maces, shields, scythes, rocket launchers, mounted machine-guns, bullet-stopping armour, and a spine-chilling laugh when they succeed in sneaking up on you.

A single area shows how elaborate it can get. Entering with Ashley you face a huge group of Los Illuminados, a red-robed commander flanked by shieldbearers and hooded mace-wielders, bowmen above and behind them. They start to run towards you, the bowmen begin firing, and Leon explodes forward, destroying the shields with a grenade, racing through the commander with a shotgun blast to the stomach, and down some stairs behind them before the bowmen can take aim. Downstairs you fight through to a room that's mercifully empty, but has two pressure panels. You arrange Leon and Ashley to stand on them: a lever rises from the ground where the commander lies, and enemies drop behind you just as those chasing burst open the door.

A mixture of incendiary grenades, roundhouse kicks and precious shotgun shells get you both out alive. Upstairs again, you pick off the bowmen in a moment of breathing space, then quickly turn the lever. Stairs appear, leading up, as you fend off another wave of cultists. On the upper floor, you lift Ashley to a raised platform that follows the edges of the room – she runs to turn a lever on each side, while you snipe at enemies trying to grab her and desperately force back the reinforcements who've arrived to harass you. Levers turned after frantically switching focus for two minutes, you force through to where Ashley's trying to get down, catch her and head for the newly opened exit. This is just one five-minute sequence in *RE4*, but the entirety of the game is similarly eventful.

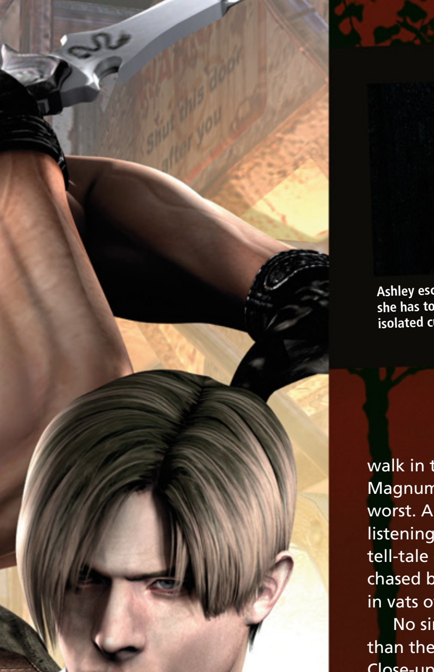
Every drop of juice is squeezed from Leon's capabilities. Even something as simple as aiming is rethought beautifully when it comes to the horrifying regenerator, a pale and nearly indestructible humanoid with a gaping maw and extending arms. The only way to destroy it is by shooting certain points in its body using a thermal scope, while the game ensures that you fight regenerators in tight spaces with your back against a wall. Getting closer, filling your sight, throwing your aim.

Touches like this show the design only goes so far towards explaining *Resident Evil 4*. It's a real piece of craftsmanship, but what elevates it is the grisly imagination that won't stop spawning set-pieces. You're fighting a whale-sized monster from a rowing boat, sticking it with harpoons, knocked out and desperately swimming back to the boat, the camera changing to the perspective of the creature moving towards your legs. You're in a furnace fighting huge golden dragons that breathe fire, operated by a pilot who's vulnerable from the sides. You're in a prison with a blind brute who hunts through sound, barely twitching while he pokes around, praying for him to


A fight against an army of cultists punctuates your latest attempt to escape, the rhythm of the fight changing with your objectives



The final task in the room can only be accomplished by Ashley, meaning you, as Leon, have to hold Los Illuminados away from both her position and yours





Ashley escapes into a side-story of her own where she has to deal with possessed suits of armour and isolated cultists, squirreling items away all the while



Blind, exquisitely sensitive to footsteps and possessed of enormous claws on each arm, you first meet this enemy in a cramped jail cell

walk in the other direction, herbs and Magnum-packed revolver ready for the worst. A sewer full of camouflaged insects, listening to their twitching and looking for the tell-tale condensation of their breath. Being chased by a towering statue. Dunking giants in vats of lava. Sitting on a throne.

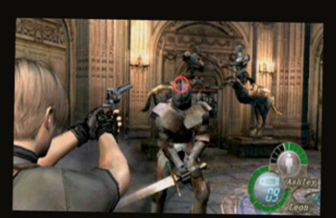
No single great moment astonishes more than the irresistible accumulation of them. Close-up skirmishes in a swamp, a high-octane base defence, running from boulders, riding a mine-cart, facing an enemy three times your size in a cage suspended above a chasm, knife-fighting a madman hunting you through his personal labyrinth, running through the wreckage of a gunship's missiles, diving through a wall of lasers from Mission Impossible, or jetskiiing from a tidal wave after stabbing the big boss right in his distended eye, *RE4* just never stops.

Its bestiary's capabilities are so finely tuned that the slightest change in the makeup of a particular encounter can lead to drastic danger – what if the enemies who hunted by sound were in the same room as enemies that could see you, forcing movement and firing? What if, instead of a room, you were trapped in a cage? *Resident Evil 4* always lets you find out, never failing to tease out every possibility from its enemies' capabilities.

And instead of resting on its laurels, *RE4* builds on them, upgrading each enemy type and challenging you to stay competitive through its famous Merchant figure. The love every player feels for the character isn't just about the gruff voice and overblown "whaddya buyin'?", it's because he's the gatekeeper for a minigame in itself, one in which incremental amounts of money and cobbled-together treasure turn your guns into WMDs. Every upgrade's a proud investment, everything he buys "at a high price" rewards your in-game sleuthing, and everything you do is felt when you fire that boosted gun for the first time.

The Merchant's just one of the metagames coursing through *RE4*'s structure. There are the shooting galleries where you'll feverishly gather bottle-caps, their presence as incongruous within the shacks and castles as a Las Vegas casino, their function as a respite and gentle training exemplary. Even better is your inventory, in the form of an attaché case

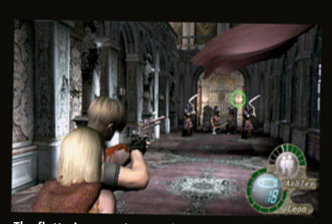
RUNNING THROUGH THE WRECKAGE OF A GUNSHIP'S MISSILES, DIVING THROUGH A WALL OF LASERS OR JETSKIIING FROM A TIDAL WAVE, RE4 NEVER STOPS



Possessed suits of armour reappear when Leon gets trapped in a tiny room. They're full of nasty parasites and able to survive a direct hit from almost anything



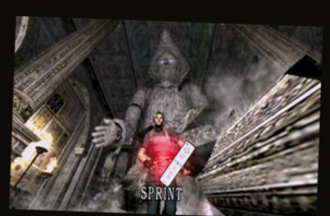
After escaping a room with a crushing spiked ceiling, Ashley's trapped in a corridor where two enemies attempt to get busy with a drill



The fluttering curtains see the GameCube hardware at its best, a face-off with a scythe-throwing mob beneath them merely the icing on the cake



Salazar sends his right hand after you, a lithe assassin that seems invincible. Open the liquid nitrogen, though, and you can go T-1000 on it



A giant statue of himself chasing you out of a castle is Salazar's last throw of the dice before you get into a real fight. It's as epic as it is final

you can look into and fiddle with the contents of at any point, freezing the gameworld. It can be a *Tetris* box or a war room, a pause for breath on the fringes of panic or a plaything. Whether to stockpile grenades, switching them to fit in colour co-ordinated rows next to the lines of herbs and ammo boxes, or jam in as many unwieldy weapons as possible, squeezing in your reserves at the sides. There aren't many other games in which you'll pay a huge amount of money to increase the size of your inventory – here, it's an investment in prepared living, a roomier case that's soon as bulging as the old one.

This is a game of games, then, which ties its digressive mechanics back into its central combat system through an almost RPG-like structure. No one's ever accused *RE4* of containing levelling before, which just shows how well hidden it is, woven seamlessly through every non-combat interaction, feeding back into every combat interaction.

Narratively, it does what it needs to do. There are occasional hints of something smarter – when Leon tells Salazar he's planning terrorism, he responds, "Isn't that a popular word these days?" – but in the main this is Evil Dead territory, where what sticks in the mind is Lord Saddler inviting you to "writhe in my cage of torment." Leon's goofy humour livens up a few exchanges, and there are all manner of quick twists, but what's important is that the exchanges are brief, informative, and serve


Leon is infected by Las Plagas early in the game, but you don't get rid of it until right at the end – you need to be disease-free to give Saddler the boot


Saddler's final form is composed of huge purple-pink tendrils, horrifically swollen joints, a massive eye, and lots and lots of teeth. Stab the eye repeatedly

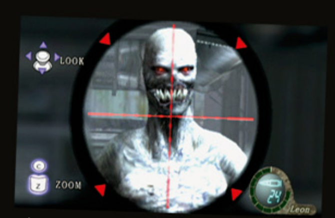


After killing Saddler and saving Ada, she runs off with the Las Plagas sample, leaving you with Ashley and the keys to a jetski as the countdown starts


After the countdown, the island explodes, you gun the engine and scream through a narrow cave, dodging collapsing scenery and crashing waves



Resident Evil rule number 74: no evil person shall fight as a person, but shall instead be transmuted into a toothy pile of goo. Salazer is proof of this



When you first fight a regenerator, you know how to kill them but don't have the tools. They're still the game's most terrifying enemy when you do



This monster is called simply 'It', and you fight it over a chasm, dropping it to its apparent doom before it comes back and tries to cut you in half



Krauser, who turns up for some action with a knife and an extended boss battle, seems comparatively orthodox until, naturally, he sprouts a mutant arm

only to keep you going the way the makers intend. Faced with the necessity of narrative in a game that players don't necessarily play for the story, *RE4* wisely minimises its screen time.

The game's greatest trick lies after the credits roll. *Resident Evil 4* isn't only a game that shines, but one whose lustre remains undimmed no matter how many times you return and play it. Encounters are changed from controlled to desperately chaotic by the tiniest increments of health, weaponry, location and luck. You realise how many gaming conventions are being toyed with (since when did a headshot make an enemy more dangerous?). And after all this *RE4* still has another surprise in store.

The greatest extra ever conceived: Mercenaries mode. Testament to just how robust *RE4*'s basic crowd-controlling quickfire action is, Mercenaries is nothing less than another game, one in which all the trappings of narrative and progress are replaced with fixed stats and a high score. *RE4* can be an arena shooter as effortlessly as it does everything else. This new breed of action revels in its arcade roots, and takes every single player along in its riptide.

And the man responsible? When asked about its rip-roaring commercial and critical success, Mikami simply says: "I'm very happy about the reception it got." Pressed, he goes further: "It was a title that a lot of people can relate to – perhaps it's not as different as you think. Despite what some people said about the controls, I think controlling Leon and fighting the enemies is a joy. And a big reason was that it is a game where people could pick it up and feel the joy, and know exactly what game this was from the very beginning. Those qualities make a successful game."

"IT WAS A GAME PEOPLE COULD PICK UP, FEEL THE JOY, AND KNOW EXACTLY WHAT GAME THIS WAS FROM THE BEGINNING"



STOCK CLEARANCE

Whatever mathematical formulae underpin *RE4*'s dynamic distribution of subsistence items like ammo and herbs, they equal the perfect balance for all but the most wasteful player. You're never left without a weapon, never backed into a trap without the means of getting out of it, and the upshot is you're soon adept with everything you're carrying around. Even when you've got a fully upgraded Red-9, it's hard to have a favourite weapon in *RE4* because, as is not the case with its imitators, they're all useful.

Resident Evil 4 was successful, though hardly the game of the decade in that respect. Its influence was also limited – though that's another way of saying no one, not even Capcom itself, had the chops to better it. There's *Gears Of War* wearing its love for it over one shoulder, *Uncharted* taking a few cues, and little else. Ultimately, *RE4* is in so many players' hearts because of the only question worth asking about a game of the decade. Is it on the list because of quality, or importance?

There is no moment less than great in *Resident Evil 4*, no sections that players talk about through gritted teeth, no platforming with dodgy collision detection or half-arsed one-offs. You never feel like you're playing a prototype. It's a game founded on a combat system of genius, built upon by systems that are games themselves, each part feeding into and off another and through to the player. It guides you with preternatural care through escalating challenge, a grisly fairground ride of stomach-turning weaves, amazing highs and exhilarating speeds. Its world is alive, popping open like a demented cuckoo clock whenever it can. And everything's built around Leon, and what you can learn to make him do. Even halfway through a new generation of hardware, these are still the purest action thrills that interactive entertainment can provide.

The characters and events depicted in this game
are fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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S.T.A.R.S. member. and then some.

The cutest little touch in *RE4* might well be this screen at the end, disclaiming real-world similarities and threatening pirates



The greatest touch, of course, is Mercenaries mode. Why *RE5*'s equivalent isn't half as good, despite offering online co-op, remains a mystery


LIVE
RAMALLAH
Stop killing my
sons brothers husbands fathers
WAR AND PEACE
CNN
WITH A BACKGROUND IN MILITARY INT
PERSON TO MAKE PEACEMAKER, A GAME
BURAK: "YOU HAVE THE STORY, NOW PLAY IT... WE NEED

Blame his father. Ever since one fateful day, unlikely game developer **Asi Burak** hasn't been able to read the news in quite the same way as most people. On arriving home from school after writing a patriotic essay about the conflict between Palestine and his home, Israel, he probably expected the typically encouraging parental response. Instead, his father explained that there was more to the conflict than Burak could have realised, that Palestinians had their own grievances and opinions, and that the world wasn't nearly as simple as he thought. "It was the first time I started looking at things from different viewpoints," Burak says. Little did he know then that this burgeoning empathy, and unyielding desire to see the truth behind the newsprint, would lead him into military intelligence, art school, advertising and, finally, designing *PeaceMaker*, a game that's come to be seen as an innovative and important work.

T ELLIGENCE, ASI BURAK WAS THE PERFECT
THAT SIMULATES THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

TO BE MORE ACTIVE IN OUR CONSUMPTION OF MEDIA"

Born in 1963 in Haifa, Israel, Burak enjoyed, he contends, a fairly standard Israeli childhood. And, contrary to what you might suspect given his later achievements, he wasn't any better versed in Israel's political landscape than any of his peers. "You have to understand," he explains, "if you live there, it's part of your daily life. Everybody knows about it. It's not like you have a news channel – the news is prime-time TV. If you listen to the radio and hear music, every hour they have the news, and small news updates in between that. It's the talk of the day, the top priority, so it's impossible not to be involved."

Still, Burak doesn't think he gained a truly "deep" perspective on the political landscape until after high school, when he entered Israel's national service programme, and joined the Israeli Intelligence Corps. He served during the Gulf War, and while he still can't shed any light on exactly what he did, he can say it was a "critical" position that required him to "make decisions on what to pass forward to the decision makers. Something like that." The position certainly tested his somewhat left-wing beliefs, but he found the work endlessly rewarding. "I really commend the Israeli army for their selection process and the tests they used," he says, "because it aligned with my skills and interests perfectly."

Burak's background enabled him to flesh out the 'Israeli argument' in *PeaceMaker* in a way few others could, but he says it was co-designer Tim Sweeney's exhaustive research that led to it having an equally detailed Palestinian 'campaign'

PeaceMaker's somewhat rustic look may make it appear a little primitive, but it's actually a deeply complex simulation. It's designed to play out quickly, but the amount of variation seen in each run-through is astonishing, and a gameplay feat outside of its educational uses

"If you live in Israel, the news is part of your life. Everybody knows about it. It's not like you have a news channel – news is prime-time TV. It's the top priority, so it's impossible not to be involved"

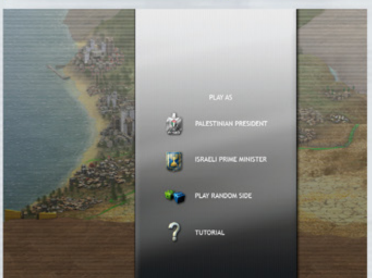


Burak found the work curiously cushy, given its gravity. In fact, he's still amused that he felt more in danger as a civilian than as an army officer (he just happened to find himself in Tel Aviv during the worst missile attack on the city during army leave, and only six years ago, stopped to buy groceries at a supermarket that was bombed less than an hour after he left). At the time, though, the comfort began to grate, and he came to realise something disturbing about his role in the war – indeed, the role of all intelligence forces and espionage in armed conflicts. It was a game.

"Intelligence helps you have a small success here and there," he explains, "but it







doesn't change the strategic situation. For example, Israel invested a lot of effort in kidnapping and eliminating enemy leaders, right? And usually, right after they did, someone else would come in to replace that leader. And even more broadly, if you hurt one enemy, a new enemy will pop up in its place."

To illustrate, he points to the entire history of the conflict: "We fought the Palestinians first of all in the '60s, when it started to be organised. We fought the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organisation] inside Israel. Then we fought the PLO in Jordan. After we had successes in Jordan, they moved to Lebanon. Then we declared war on Lebanon and moved in, and they moved to Tunisia. Then we fought them in Tunisia, and they moved back to the West Bank. It's a never-ending struggle."

He pauses. "You can win small fights, but you're not winning the war with intelligence. Intelligence tends to miss the big strategic events – the fall of the Berlin Wall; things like the Yom Kippur War in 1973, in which Israel was surprised by an attack from Syria and Egypt; the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait; 9/11 – wherever it's outside the box, wherever the event is very dramatic, it's very hard for intelligence people to come to decision makers and take the bat, and say: 'This is what's going to happen'. But they won't admit that, will they?"

The capacity for self-delusion in intelligence forces was immense, he discovered. While he admits that if Israel were to shut down all intelligence operations tomorrow the other side would have a significant advantage, he doesn't think it really means anything in a broader sense. "People in the army or intelligence services need to believe that they're making a huge impact," he says. "This is why they invest their time, and they should feel they make a huge impact. But at the end of the day, it's like arm-wrestling. Sometimes you're on top, sometimes you're on the bottom, but it doesn't change strategically."

Yatom Bombs

***PeaceMaker* has a lot of fans, but there's one influential Israeli politician who didn't take much of a shine to it: Dani Yatom, Labour MP and former director of Mossad. When challenged to apply his chosen strategies to Burak's game live on Israel's Channel 2 news, he was bemused to discover they led to catastrophe. He concluded that the game was unrealistic, but Burak has a different perspective: "He said he did exactly what he was supposed to do, so it was unrealistic that he failed. And he was: he was doing what the usual cycle of Israeli leaders usually do, and, as we know, that didn't get us very far, did it?"**

Naturally, though, it was difficult to leave the work behind. It's not every day you're given access to the kind of information Burak sifted through – "The public has no idea how sophisticated it is" – and beyond that, it was constantly exciting. At the same time, though, it didn't feel real. This was exacerbated by the fact that there was no equivalent in real life to his duties there. "I could have gone on," he adds, "and gotten promoted, but it didn't feel like going out and facing reality. If you want to really impact the political situation in Israel or the social situation in Israel, I think there are places that are much better than being in the army."

Burak would soon find a unique – and effective – means of making an impact, but it would have a lot more in common with games and virtual reality than he could ever have predicted.

First, though, he needed to work out what he wanted to do with his life. Ultimately, he steered himself off the path of his IT-inclined intelligence peers, and went to arts school. In Israel, you don't get your first stab at an independent tertiary education until you've completed at least three years of national service. Burak did five.

Perhaps realising the market for intricately designed apocalyptic tableaux wasn't exactly pumping in Israel in the late '90s, Burak took his BA in graphic design to the world of advertising, where he became an art director at Saatchi & Saatchi. "It was great for the ego," he chuckles. "You sit in your cubicle and you make a poster or something, and then you see it all over the place in the street. Or, for example, if you create a TV commercial, especially in Israel, where there are not as many channels, and everyone talks about it. I could walk in the street and hear someone whistle the tune of my TV commercial. But at the same time, of course, it was meaningless! It's another



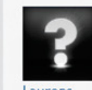
Burak is certain that every role he's ever held in his life, from the military to advertising to game design, informs his work now to a significant degree

game. You know, it's like you take those brands and you promote them, and probably they would sell better, but… I don't know. There's a lot of manipulation there. I don't regret it, but it wasn't satisfying. Very shallow. Superficial."

While working in the US, Burak first heard about Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology Center, formed by The Last Lecture writer Randy Pausch and professor Don Marinelli in 1998. He was immediately fascinated, and began making enquiries. "I enrolled very early in the life of the programme," he says, "but I just thrived there. I loved every single minute of it. And I feel very lucky to have been there when Randy was. I mean, I loved Don, too, but those two were a terrific combination, a real right-brain, left-brain team."

And it was at Carnegie that Burak met Eric Brown and Tim Sweeney, the two men with whom he'd soon collaborate on making *PeaceMaker*.






"We wanted to make a statement. A political statement, and also a statement about the industry. We wanted to change the industry. If we could be profitable like this, then it would feed the market"

It should be clear by now, though, that Burak isn't one for easy choices. After working with Brown and Sweeney at university to create the prototype of a game that simulated the Israeli and Palestinian governments, he decided it would be ridiculous to abandon what was gradually becoming a hotly anticipated product. "The response was huge, even then," he says. "People were asking me, 'When is this thing coming out? When can I get it?' So we decided that, after graduating, we'd form our own company, ImpactGames. And it was a very smooth transition – we left Carnegie Mellon in May 2006 and got our first $100,000 in funding in June."

The group was warned against becoming a for-profit developer, considering the niche nature of *PeaceMaker*, but Burak ignored the advice. Although he now admits that the warnings were entirely reasonable, he was out to prove something. But publishers wouldn't touch the game. Burak received plenty of friendly responses, but the message ultimately remained the same: they couldn't support political content. "So, in the end," he laughs, "we did it ourselves. Everyone who was making so-called 'serious' or 'educational' games was going non-profit, and we thought that was just the easy way out. We wanted to make a statement. A political statement, and also a statement about the industry. We wanted to change the industry, really – if we proved we could be profitable doing things like this, then it would feed the market, and *PeaceMaker* wouldn't still be the flagship product of its type, as it is now."

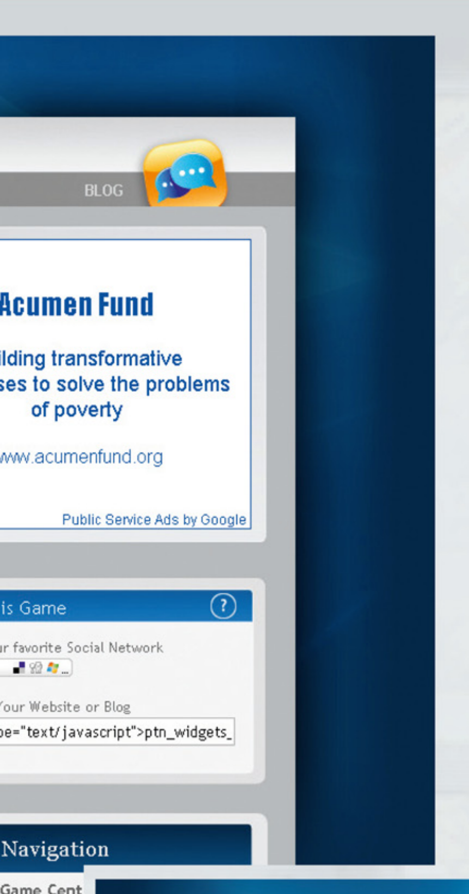




PeaceMaker has won fans on both sides of the Israeli divide in the three years since its release, securing distribution in universities and peace organisations worldwide. Burak is disappointed that other developers haven't followed his lead: he thinks a new *PeaceMaker* is well overdue

Needless to say, while ImpactGames managed to recoup its investment, *PeaceMaker* didn't exactly compete with *Guitar Hero* in the charts. But what it did manage to do was, in many ways, far more profound than any piece of traditional gaming entertainment could hope to achieve. When Burak, dissatisfied with the artifice of military intelligence, wondered how he could make an actual, political impact on the war in which he was taking part, what better solution could he have hoped for than *PeaceMaker*?

Where most 'games' about war, extending back to the tabletop wargames of the early 19th century or even chess, are about annihilation and conquest, *PeaceMaker* is, as the title suggests, about finding a peaceful arrangement between both sides. And because the simulation, born of Burak's military experiences and Brown and Sweeney's heavy research into Palestinian history, is detailed and realistic, that's extremely difficult, despite the game's short length. A lot of prospective buyers, who had heard about the game from the intense press coverage it received – including a Guardian article published after the game's



News Of The World

Play The News **has yet to set the internet aflame, and with good reason: it's strange. Strange enough to put off certain reward-hungry gamers from giving it a try. "It's supposed to be like fantasy baseball," Burak explains, "but for the news." In other words, you gather information about the multiple perspectives on a given hot topic – as well as crib notes on which parties have an interest in its conclusion – and then you make informed predictions on what will happen, and then… you wait. This, Burak has found, is the part that stupefies a lot of players – why, they wonder, do I need to wait to find out if I succeeded or not, and how long will I have to wait? In truth, there's no set deadline: you don't find out whether you were right about Sarkozy having an affair until Fleet Street does. Get into the swing of it, though, and *PTN* is a deeply entertaining exercise – and, naturally, it furthers Burak's agenda of getting people to analyse news reports with a little more acumen.**



release in 2007 – were put off by the somewhat dry concept. But while Burak didn't manage to change the videogame industry in one fell swoop, *PeaceMaker* is now being played by US army generals as part of their studies, and it's being distributed on the West Bank by the Peres Center for Peace, a large non-profit organisation which sees its value as a conflict-resolution tool.

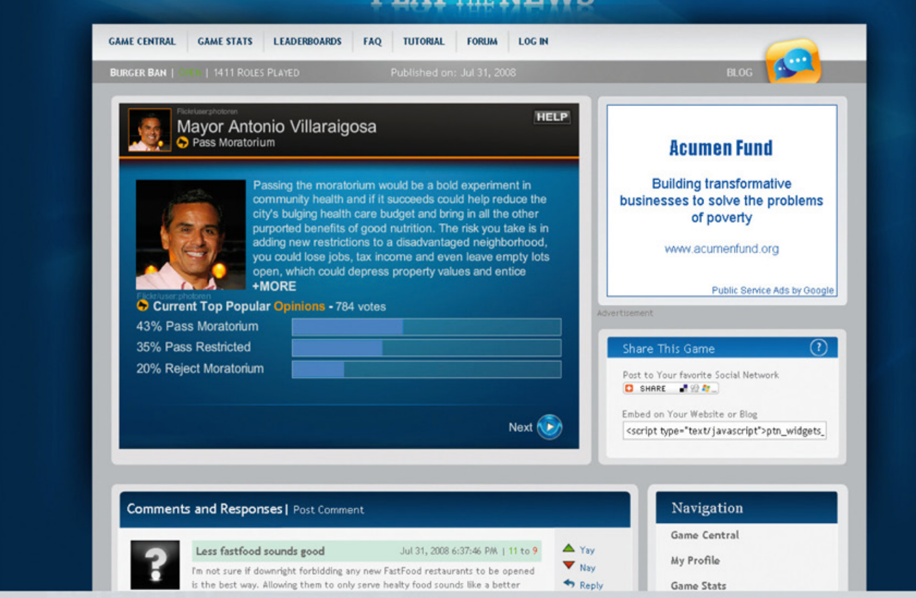
Of those videogame buyers who did decide to take the plunge into *PeaceMaker*, many wrote to ImpactGames, thanking the team for giving them a more robust perspective on the Israel-Palestine conflict than they'd developed in decades of reading the news. This became *PeaceMaker*'s legacy. Burak realised that, beyond the actual politics of the game, it was teaching players an important skill – one, he half-confirms, he used extensively while working for the Intelligence Corps. "We learn using very old-school methods," he says. "And it's not even the accuracy of the source, the book, the journalist, or whatever, that's the problem. It's the nature of the medium. There are so many layers hidden underneath the news, and what you see might be either manipulated by someone, or just part of the truth, or kind of… There are so many things that are happening behind the curtain that you're not aware of."

ImpactGames' current project, *Play The News*, is Burak's attempt to remedy that. Sort of like *PeaceMaker*-lite, *Play The News* is a web-based 'game' that takes a current event – New York's burger ban, say, or the Chrysler-GM merger – addresses the numerous different perspectives and parties that have a stake in the issue, and then asks the player to predict the outcome. *Play The News* is being pitched at news publishers throughout the world as a supplement to their existing content. "You have the story," Burak says, "now play it."

"It's important," he concludes, "because we need to be more active in our consumption of media, whether it's how our kids are learning, how we read the news, how we're trained for our jobs, or even what our soldiers and generals study."

Naturally, only Burak himself had the opportunity to have that life-changing after-school conversation with his father. For everyone else, ImpactGames and *Play The News* will have to suffice.





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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Chrono Trigger



Travel back to save the future, and witness Square's glory days. Being put on trial for item theft packs an emotional punch that gives *Heavy Rain* a run for its money.
DS, SQUARE ENIX

Pokémon Heart Gold



Nothing makes our Venonat happier than his daily journey in our Pokéwalker, especially when he gets to trade items with a certain other mag's friendly Hoot-Hoot.
DS, NINTENDO

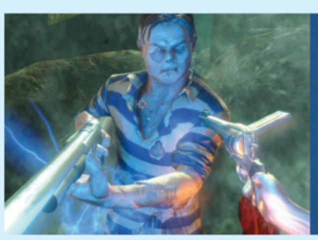
BioShock 2



It's dirty, rotten, falling apart at the seams and filled with psychopathic addicts. But it has its good points, too, and Rapture was more than deserving of 2K Marin's return visit.
360, PC, PS3, 2K

The circus of values

Who wins in the price war over DLC distractions?



DLC is now wielded as the latest weapon in the battle to curtail the trade-in market. But, going by the *BioShock 2* experience, it seems gamers feel that they're having their wallets squeezed rather than being pampered with added value

Game publishers continue to grapple with the possibilities of DLC. But, while it arrives in unpredictable shapes and sizes, the one thing you might expect to rely on is that it will actually be downloadable. 2K Games came under fire when it transpired that *BioShock 2*'s Sinclair Solutions DLC was on the disc, unlocked with a small download and a small charge. For the price, players received a smattering of extras – a third upgrade for each weapon and an extended level cap, among other minor tweaks. And the internet was very wroth, and its countenance fell.

You might reasonably say that most of the internet probably loses an equivalent sum of money down the back of the sofa every week, but the point isn't money, it's value for money, and how customers perceive it. For the cost of a pint we spent a hundred happy hours with Chun-Li in a new costume – we knew what we were buying and what it was worth to us. Even *Modern Warfare 2*'s relatively expensive map pack should see us through more than £10 worth of play. Few people really demand something for nothing, and iTunes and Bleep.com have proven that many are happy to pay for something if attaining it is as convenient as illicit, free methods.

This comes unstuck when companies think like Ryanair. Charge £6.50 for a vodka and Coke and you risk your customers feeling like they're being exploited – and this is the type of frustration surrounding *BioShock 2*. It's not that its DLC costs a lot of money, but that it isn't anything that players especially want for the price, and yet there's no more appealing alternative.

In the wider context of videogames, however, there's always an alternative. No clearer has this been than in EA's recent marketing campaign, which pitches *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* as an alternative to *Modern Warfare 2*, pointing out its free DLC. EA isn't shy about charging where appropriate, but it does have room for broader ideas about the value of DLC – such as its potential to undermine a competitor and build a playerbase, or, in the case of *Mass Effect 2*'s DLC freebie, its power to reward first-hand purchasers. It's upselling, sure, but if it incentivises buyers rather than alienating them, then it's surely a step in the right direction.

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL: CONVICTION

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC **RELEASE:** APRIL 16 (360), APRIL 30 (PC)
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E176, E204, E205, E208







It's such a relief to play a near-future shooter that exchanges greys and browns for rich, deep hues. Shame the monochromatic stealth indicator negates bold use of colour

The fifth major outing for superspy Sam Fisher dares to revise things that have so far defined the thirdperson stealth series – starting with the stealth. A new, smouldering Fisher is untroubled by deadly force, using sneaking only as a stopgap between quick, brutal strikes. Having gone on the run, he's also without the support of Third Echelon, initially depriving him of his trademark gadgetry.



A fast crouched run has moved aside for a context-sensitive cover-to-cover movement system, Fisher scurrying and sliding between scenery items with slick, furtive animation. The joypad controls are unusual: initially, we found ourselves accidentally throwing EMP grenades when trying to open boxes

Yet this back-to-basics Fisher soon proves to be the most capable, and vicious, of all.

While the content of *Conviction*'s story is lukewarm Clancy, all PMCs, electro-bombs and anti-presidential plots, the manner of its telling shows glimpses of great invention. Fisher's thoughts are projected as flickering films over the surrounding environment, and its opening act is spotted with sudden recollections that wholly transport the protagonist back into remembered events. It simultaneously instructs and involves the player in the game's new mechanics. One moment he's stalking PMC hitmen through a marketplace, and the next he's standing beside his daughter's bed years before, telling her, and the player, not to be afraid of the dark: important things stand out when Fisher is concealed, while the rest of the world sinks into monochrome. Then we're zipped into the present again, as Fisher puts this wisdom into action.

Later, he slips back into this interactive memory, an inept house invasion demonstrating how new aspects of combat work. In an odd, and slightly unwieldy contrivance, melee takedowns gift Fisher automatic execution moves: mark opponents (the number depending on your equipped weapon) with the right bumper and a single tap of a button unleashes slow-mo gun-fu to plug the tagged targets. While automation and autonomy are usually opposed, the player's involvement is simply displaced to setting up such opportunities, or responding rapidly to the evolving situation. It's all part of a more aggressive outlook for the de-goggled hero. There are fewer overall interactions than in other *Splinter Cell*s – you won't get Fisher to brace himself above a doorway, duck under a desk, drag corpses into shadow or dive into air vents, but bodies aren't incriminating evidence here: they're warnings. Shadow isn't there for hiding: it's there to empower your assaults. Fisher is as much Batman as he is Bourne.

You're now encouraged to move in and out of darkness all the time, decimating your alerted, terrified foes with every emergence. In doing so, the game makes you deal with the dynamic situation of an alerted enemy. They try to hunt you down, probing into corners with their flashlights, forming perimeters which you circumvent via a handy overhead pipe. The environments, at their best, are playgrounds for Fisher's lethal abilities, giving him every opportunity to outflank and outwit opponents who otherwise outgun him. Fisher is far from invulnerable, but most encounters only end in death when you attempt some ambitiously violent plan, feeling for the edges of his capabilities. It's not without occasional imperfections: thanks to slightly finicky

Enemies aren't credibly intelligent, but they are entertaining AI playthings. Our one major complaint is that they tend to repeat the same lines of dialogue – perhaps to incentivise their hasty murder

context-sensitive interactions, attempts to silently exfiltrate through a door occasionally caused us to hurl ourselves through the adjacent plate-glass window. But even when things go wrong, Fisher's more than equipped to deal with the situation, setting off an EMP and snapping a spine in the confusion, dropping the remaining enemies before the lights have flickered back on.

This newly confrontational Fisher has no truck with choke holds or tranqs – he deals only in snapped vertebrae and smashed throats, and teeters on the edge of becoming something monstrous. Interrogation sequences in which the player slams unfortunate goons into and through scenery are of limited interaction, but prove swift and startling. The innocent environment becomes a torture chamber, the presence of a piano suddenly filled with ominous potential. And though all the game asks the player to do is to drag his victim around and press 'B' to bludgeon, it uses the limitations of your action to surprise. Fisher doesn't always do what you think you've told him; sometimes he does too much – and your finger ends up hovering over the button, unsure whether you really want to press it again.

Interrogation sequences are there to break up the neck-snapping action, and elsewhere the game attempts to switch up the pace by throwing you into full-on gunfights. They're an understandable but unwelcome inclusion. Straight-up combat is always a fallback option throughout; these sections simply lack the interesting alternatives the game usually presents. A flashback to Fisher's antics in Iraq is a checkbox-competent plodding shootout while, elsewhere, platforming sections involving laser tripwires feel like a chore, exacerbated by poor checkpointing.



This newly confrontational Fisher deals only in snapped vertebrae and smashed throats. He is on the edge of becoming something monstrous

Not all of the game's attempts to mix things up come off track, however – a chase around the Lincoln Memorial is a narrowly scripted but heart-pumping affair, and all the more refreshing for its occurrence during daylight. If there's one downside to Fisher's shadowy activities, it's that it has a habit of deadening the palate. In previous games, he observed the world through the tedious green wash of night vision; here, if you're playing it right, Fisher spends much of his time in black-and-white. It's a misfortune that grows as the game progresses, compounded further still by the reappearance of goggles late in the game. These give you the ability to pick out bodies through walls via heat, but otherwise reduce the environment to a sea of grey particles, distorting with movement. For all the attempts to discourage overuse, it seems a shame that the goggles and desaturation effects can cause you to miss the sumptuous detail of the levels, with their unusually rich reds and voluminous blues.

Conviction is in reach of greatness. Its flaws stand out in the short singleplayer campaign, and its tail end relies too much on the gunplay that the game otherwise relegates to a begrudging last resort. But when it hits its stride, the environments unlock the player's tactical ambitions in a way that is truly empowering, launching you between shadow and light, discretion and aggression. In some ways it's sad to say goodbye to old, subtle Fisher, but as *Splinter Cell* goes from covert to overt, a new-found dynamism emerges, happily driving players to return to its vicious little sandbox battles, tempting them to obliterate enemies in ever slicker, quicker ways. And that's surely the hallmark of any true conviction: it bears repeating. **[8]**

Play it again, Sam



A meaty co-op campaign, with splitscreen too? It's just like the old days. And, as with *Chaos Theory*'s twoplayer mode, *Conviction*'s is a true delight, with players taking on the roles of bickering US and Russian agents in a story that intersects Fisher's own. It's only marred by the confusing way in which takedown abilities are pooled, but muddle through and there's co-op of rare sophistication and reward. There are challenge rooms, too: labelled Deniable Ops, these missions throw at you objectives of the 'take down ten enemies without raising the alert' kind. The much-loved Spies Vs Mercs mode is absent, however, replaced by a Spy Vs Spy mode in which two players attempt to out-sneak each other, while trying to exploit the hostility of AI goons to their advantage.



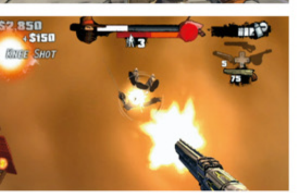
RED STEEL 2

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: UBISOFT PARIS **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E204, E206









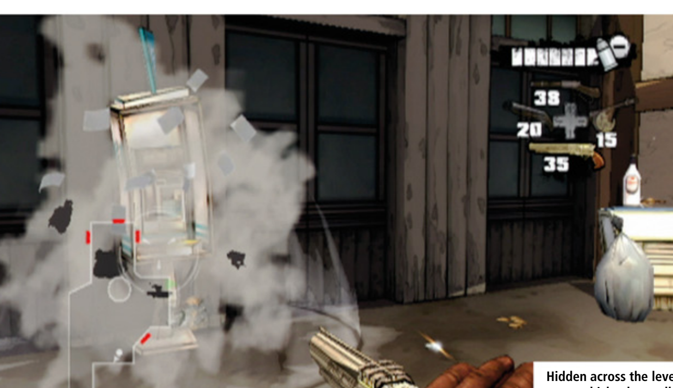
One of the more entertaining special moves flings enemies into the air. Players can follow up with either a series of aerial slashes or, as seen here, indulge in some *Devil May Cry*-style enemy juggling with whichever gun they have equipped

Whereas the original *Red Steel* disappointed by failing to live up to expectations, *Red Steel 2*'s successes lie mostly in confounding them. A sequel that unhesitatingly shrugs off the style, setting and design of its forebear, and a firstperson shooter that's really a 3D action game in disguise, *Red Steel 2* manages to be both the sword-fighting title gamers have demanded since Nintendo's motion-sensing console was announced and not quite what we've been expecting at all.

Cast as the man-with-no-name protagonist, players are tasked with hacking, shooting and stabbing their MotionPlus-enabled way through roughly ten hours' worth of gunslinging samurai as part of a Saturday morning cartoon-style story of redemption and revenge. *Red Steel 2*'s swordplay – the meat of the title's combat – eschews simulation in favour of a fast-paced combo system. Basic sword slashes are achieved by swinging the Remote in any direction, with the strength of the blow dependant on the breadth of your swing, whereas guarding against both melee attacks and incoming bullets is performed by holding the 'A' button. Ironically, while parrying blows (by guarding and positioning the Remote at a right angle to your enemy's incoming attack) is the mechanic which best shows off the added MotionPlus precision, it's also one of the less efficient strategies for coming out of an encounter intact. The game throws its aggressive enemies at you in numbers high enough to ensure that the polite parries and counters of a one-on-one duel are rarely an option: instead, players must use the game's dodge move (a simple tap of 'A' in conjunction with holding a direction on the analogue stick) to weave in and out of enemies' attack range, following up with armour-rending special attacks and finishers. Gunplay has its place, but is mostly limited to crowd control and the picking off of weakened stragglers. The system works, though its success lies not in accurately aping swordplay but in translating into both motion control and a firstperson perspective the twitch-reflex intensive combo and dodge mechanics of a game like *Devil May Cry* or *Bayonetta*.

> The game throws its enemies at you in numbers high enough to ensure that the polite parries and counters of a one-on-one duel are rarely an option

Like those titles, *Red Steel 2* features an extensive upgrade system. Indeed, the range of what can be purchased at the various saloons dotted across the game's levels is an achievement in itself. New guns, new moves, more armour, health bar extensions, gun upgrades, move upgrades, ammo upgrades and more. Fortunately, the game throws cash in the player's direction with equal abandon,



Hidden across the levels are various tokens and stars, which when collected or shot yield a cash reward. Other ways of making money include destroying every piece of level furniture in sight



Player health recharges between enemy encounters, but once a battle has started the only way to restore your life at all is through victory. Purchasing at least a couple of armour and health upgrades soon becomes essential



There's no blood or gore in the game, but such a high level of stylisation ensures that this really isn't a problem. Rest assured that a katana slash across the chest followed up with a stab to the gut manages to look suitably painful





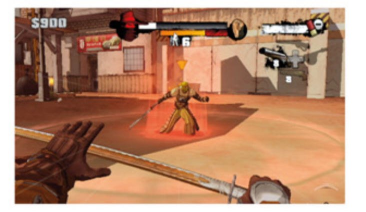
An enemy with a motion prompt above his head is ripe for a finishing blow. Upgrades can be purchased which extend the duration of the brief window in which players are able to administer the coup de grace

rewarding the more complex enemy takedowns with a greater dollar reward, and encouraging players to shoot every box, oil drum and empty rocking chair they find for the money within.

It's this constant flow of new moves and weapon improvements (guns can be upgraded from rusty peashooters to glowing, explosive-firing pieces of retro futurism) that keeps the combat feeling fresh. Fresher, even, than it really should feel after a few hours in. While enemies reappear in increasingly armoured forms over the course of the game, there's only a handful of basic types, and your tactics for defeating them, especially once a selection of the more useful moves have been unlocked (such as the handy dodge-behind-and-slash combo), can handle most of what the game throws at you with little variation. Later boss battles (at least on medium difficulty) become a challenge of spamming as many of these moves as quickly as possible, and using such tactics saw us fell the final boss with rather anticlimactic speed.

The game's setting, a hi-tech mish-mash of the far east and the old west, feels novel throughout. Unifying these disparate threads of tumbleweed and neon is a bright and characterful cel-shaded graphical style which brings back fond memories of Ubisoft's underrated *XIII*, and makes *Red Steel 2* one of the more visually accomplished titles on Wii. It's a shame, really, that these environments aren't put to more interesting use. *Red Steel 2*'s mission design shepherds its players between various switches and levers in order to set up its combat scenarios, which see a small portion of the map arbitrarily closed off until a set number of enemies are defeated. The sidequests that could have supplied variation to this structure instead send players on uninteresting scavenger hunts (destroy eight wanted posters, collect four pieces of ore, etc) around the otherwise empty environments. These sidequests stretch the usually perfectly capable minimap beyond its usefulness, and make players feel the absence of a full overworld map which otherwise may not have been missed. Irrespective of your objective, travelling through *Red Steel 2*'s environments is an experience punctuated by frequent loading screens dressed up as slowly opening doors – one such animation even goes as far as to have the protagonist impatiently slamming his fist against the entryway.

Despite limitations, the core of *Red Steel 2* contains a combat system that weaves and crosses genres with all the finesse and grace of its katana-wielding star. After the first game, the series was need in of a rethink; now all it needs is refinement. **[7]**



Enraged enemies, as signified by a bright red glow surrounding them, attack faster and more aggressively, and can also spur any nearby bad guys into a similar frenzy. It's a shame it's rare that you're able to take down the first frenzied foe before this occurs, however

One time only



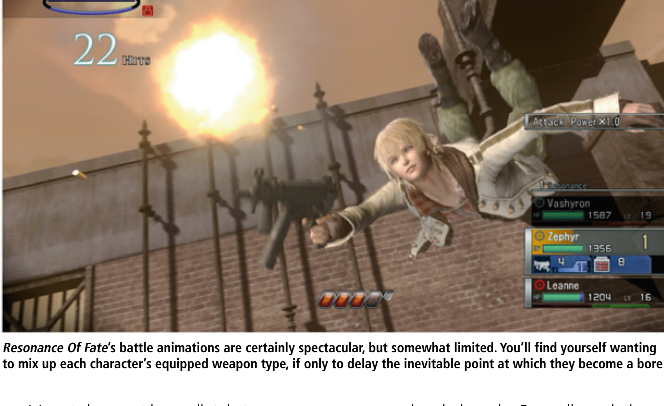
Considering the strength of *Red Steel 2*'s visuals, it seems odd that, for cutscenes, the game switches to a presentation style that may technically offer better detail, but lacks the rest of the game's character and style. Even odder is that one of the earlier of these sequences contains a rather drawn-out QTE – the only one in the entire game, in fact. Possibly a design relic of a time when the game was to feature more such moments, such a device couldn't feel more out of a place in a game which otherwise encourages and rewards precise, MotionPlus-enabled controls. Few players will miss it once it's done.

The farther down players venture into the world of Basel, the more prominent and industrial its clockwork mechanisms become – the lowest regions of the city have an increasingly industrial aesthetic



RESONANCE OF FATE

FORMAT: PS3 (VERSION TESTED), 360 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA **DEVELOPER:** TRI-ACE **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E206, E208



Resonance Of Fate's battle animations are certainly spectacular, but somewhat limited. You'll find yourself wanting to mix up each character's equipped weapon type, if only to delay the inevitable point at which they become a bore

Hexxored



***Resonance Of Fate*'s world map takes the form a series of platforms jutting out from a central tower, with the platforms themselves divided into grids of hexagonal cells. Players are unable to traverse these cells until they've lain down 'energy hexes' – essentially puzzle pieces which activate any dormant cells they're placed over. The system is complicated by the presence of coloured cells which can only be activated by hexes of a corresponding colour, and 'terminals' – map nodes which, when chained to dungeons by a series of coloured hexes, can imbue that part of the map with a variety of effects – doubling your electricity damage in an area where enemies are weak to it, for example. The result is an interesting layer of strategy overlaying your in-dungeon battle tactics.**

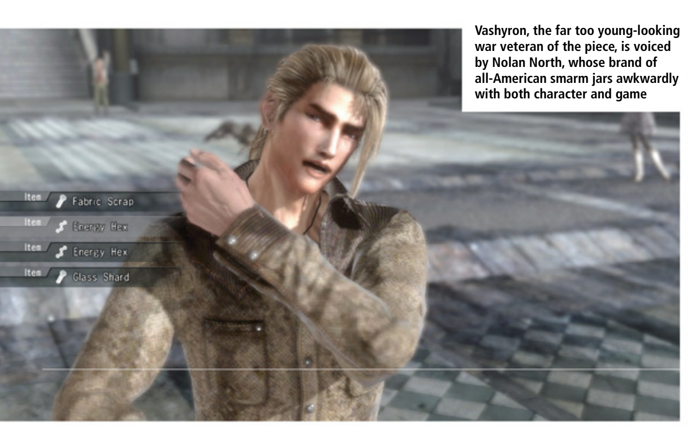
The grinding of gears is ever present in the background of *Resonance Of Fate*. The tower of Basel, built to purify the poisoned air of *Resonance*'s future Earth, runs according to clockwork. The towns, markets and dungeons through which the player journeys are built around these spinning axles and whirring cogs, and the game itself, for all its outward flamboyance and occasional eccentricity, is yoked to systems of equally intricate and inflexible construction.

At *Resonance Of Fate*'s core is a battle system which manages to feel both complex and straitjacketed. Combat takes place in open arenas where your team of three gunslingers is pitted against packs of enemies, and centres above all on positioning characters in the optimum position to unleash 'Hero Actions' – slices of ballistic acrobatics which leave the player invulnerable for their duration. On top of this, the game has two distinct damage types – 'scratch damage' dealt by machine guns, and 'direct damage' meted out by handguns. Enemies take more damage from the former, which recovers over time, but a single point of the latter converts all the accumulated scratch damage into genuine harm. Battles require the player to carefully plan attack order and character placement in order to maximise their chances of success.

It's not the most immediately transparent of systems, and the game's optional tutorial offers little practical or tactical advice. Some ideas feel half-baked, and even contradictory. The tutorial introduces a wide range of attack types – HP gauge breaks, aerial attacks, smackdown attacks – yet these are random outcomes of standard weapons fire rather than viable approaches to work into your strategy. Arenas, meanwhile, feature cover, yet players will often want to stay in the open to maximise the effectiveness of their special attacks – which can be entirely scuppered by a bump into a wall. This, perhaps, is why *Resonance*'s arenas are a little bare beyond those walls and the occasional obstacle. Regardless, their austere design isn't helped by the uniformly industrial setting, which sees both forests and snowy peaks rendered in the same shades of brown and grey. It's telling that the game differentiates the entrances and exits of rooms with patches of colour in order to stop players becoming entirely disoriented.

Outside of combat, the game further innovates. An inventory system which sees you constructing parts for your guns leads into a weapon customisation screen more reminiscent of *Resident Evil 4*'s attaché case than traditional RPG stat tweaking, and the world map offers strategic complexities of its own (see 'Hexxored'). There's also scope for customising your party's wardrobe, a peripheral but compulsive addition which shows off the protagonists' excellent character models (and in turn shows up the blandness of the game's NPCs). It's a fine addition – there are only so many times you can watch a character somersault over an enemy while unleashing a Matrix-style hail of gunfire before a change of jacket becomes more an essential than a luxury,

That's the problem – for all the spectacle of *Resonance*'s gunfights, the game feels restrictive. It's a strategy game in which your tactical options are limited to one or two reliable strategies, and an RPG in which character development is chained to similar lines. There are some novel ideas here, but they exist within a system as strict and predictable as clockwork itself. **[6]**



Vashyron, the far too young-looking war veteran of the piece, is voiced by Nolan North, whose brand of all-American smarm jars awkwardly with both character and game









Retribution is an enjoyably camp arcade-style shooter, but the dialogue doesn't seem to be in on the joke, falling short of *Max Payne*'s bullet-tipped irony



DEAD TO RIGHTS: RETRIBUTION

FORMAT: **360, PS3** RELEASE: **APRIL 23** PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **VOLATILE GAMES** PREVIOUSLY IN: **E201, E209**



You'd be forgiven for not being excited about *Dead To Rights: Retribution*. It's a resurrection of a hackneyed previous-generation actioner which paled in the wake of explosive games such as *Max Payne*. In terms of originality, it's at several removes from anything that could be considered a source, and at first glance it appears to stake an alarming amount on the notion that savaging an enemy's testicles with a police dog is endlessly, repetitively entertaining.

It's a bet that pays off. The game's lack of fresh ideas never disappears as a problem, but it does recede significantly, in no small part thanks to the fact that de-scroting *Retribution*'s faceless waves of evil-doers really is play-it-again pleasurable. More than that, the mechanic is symbolic of the game's wider approach – uncomplicated, and essentially unambitious beyond being technically sound and enjoyable to play.

Retribution feels like a game from another era, so much so that it's almost a deliberate period piece. Not technologically – it's visually and physically solid, if careful not to overstep its own boundaries – but in its happily simple mean streets setting, full of twilight alleyways, face-painted gangs and an impossibly biceped hero cop with a macho fist of a name ('Jack… Slate'). It's a cartoon of '80s blockbuster values – unchallenging, but also a kind of relief. It certainly takes the pressure off the gameplay to be anything other than simple fun.

That gameplay falls into three broad categories: shooting, fighting, and being a dog. The gunplay, like much else, is a hardboiled hand-me-down from *Max Payne*, with a loosely swinging thirdperson camera, an emphasis on lining up headshots and thuggish enemies pulled straight from Fox News' nightmares, who reel and collapse spectacularly under fire. There's also a slow-motion focus mode, charged with headshots and activated by pressing 'L1', and a chunky cover system which operates just like the one in *Gears Of War* or, more suitably, *50 Cent: Blood On The Sand*. Uninspired, then, but smooth and satisfying all the same.

The hand-to-hand combat is less accomplished. There are parallels here with *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, Slate taking on groups of goons with simple combos and blocks. It fails to capture the robust sense of timing or precision of Rocksteady's game, but it's a failure that leads to tedium rather than frustration, and things are livened up by Slate's ability to take hostages and either use them as mobile cover or fling them off roofs and railway platforms.

The ability to play as Slate's dog, Shadow, is the game's clearest deviation from its looming influences, and it's remarkably accomplished. As well as issuing simple commands to Shadow while playing as Slate (down on the D-pad for 'come here', and up for 'go there' or 'kill'), players can control the ferocious attack dog themselves during certain missions. These are stealth-based – holding 'L2' lowers Shadow into a poised crawl – but avoid the usual groan-inducing pitfalls. Guards are mercifully unobservant, easily distracted by tactical barking, and even fun to hide thanks to the funny and surprisingly lifelike animation of Shadow dragging their prostrate bodies into cover like giant man-shaped bones.

In many ways it would fitting to say that *Retribution* has the thirdperson shooter by the balls, but the game is too uneven and modest for that to be entirely appropriate. It's simple, enjoyable, and in wisely steering clear of trying anything grand or complex, is an enjoyable if self-contained success. **[6]**





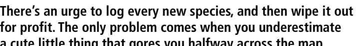
Yes, there's a train level. Like a greatest hits of vigilante cop narratives, *Retribution* also takes us to a besieged skyscraper, an abandoned warehouse and some docks

Dog-tective mode

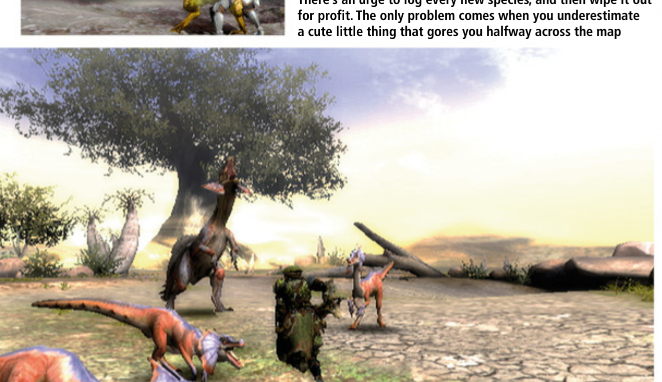


Batman: Arkham Asylum **was released in August 2009, which suggests that the similarities evident in some parts of *Dead To Rights* are only coincidental. Certainly the latter's crunching hand-to-hand combat was in place before the Dark Knight's latest appearance in a game. In terms of presentational style, though, it's not difficult to imagine that Shadow's stealth mode was influenced by Batman's detective mode. Hunker the dog's furry form down and walls dissolve into blueprint transparency as distant enemies become visible, major organs and all, in coloured X-ray vision. The parallels are glaring, but at least *Dead To Rights* picks a fine target for inspiration.**

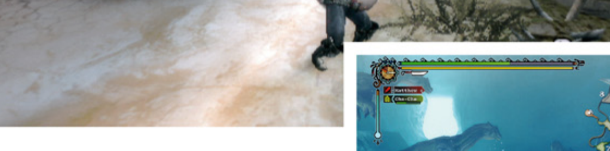




There's an urge to log every new species, and then wipe it out for profit. The only problem comes when you underestimate a cute little thing that gores you halfway across the map



The environment soon becomes an opponent and a factor you're forced to take into account. Setting off into the desert without a cool drink will lead to nothing but a leathery corpse



MONSTER HUNTER TRI

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** APRIL **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: CAPCOM **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E196, E207, E208

Fully localised, free of friend codes and subscriptions, is *Monster Hunter* finally becoming accessible? You'd be forgiven for thinking so; alas, the opening hours are the standard RPG tutorial bolted on to a stripped-down open world, a blend of *World Of Warcraft* and *Phantasy Star Online* creating a very traditional adventure. It's easy to see what piqued Nintendo's interest: its console isn't great at taking its audience online, and this formula's been tested on home consoles before. Most importantly, there's no equivalent on 360 or PS3 – yet.

Innovations are geared towards the online portion of the title, and in the main this is *Monster Hunter* as we know it. Characters are customisable, and from a flashy bikini (for either sex) to some fertile facial hair, there's a wealth of options that give giant-killing that personal touch. You cut your teeth in Moga, a non-threatening hub carved up into numbered sections for simple navigation, but while the map suggests a generic treasure hunt, *Monster Hunter*'s world offers much more than that.

Visually it doesn't live up to Capcom's too-good-to-be-true pre-release screenshots, but this is still a beautiful world. *Monster Hunter*'s lands are robust hideaways for relics, predators and prey, with an indigenous population that convincingly replicates an ecosystem. It's more than just window dressing: packs of creatures roam in patterns, encouraging planned assaults and research.

Getting to know your enemy before stewing them is a big part of *Monster Hunter*'s appeal (see 'Bad chow disease'). Analysing the environment with a pair of binoculars and your Monster Notes is a safari of epic proportions, and more than mere sightseeing. Research aids hugely in later missions, helping you identify new species through study of their roaming patterns and geographical habitat. The speed at which you can traverse the shrubbery and rugged rock formations helps: a sprint offsets potentially monotonous back-and-forth, and the ability to return to your homestead at any point (except when in the middle of quests) is useful, extra shortcuts an added bonus.

Navigating the controller setup, however, finds *Monster Hunter* in boggier territory. Carried over from the handheld versions are the most awkward projectile weapons in recent memory, and the Classic Controller Pro does little to ease the strain, the game oddly neglecting 'ZL' and 'ZR' and instead mapping a convoluted system of actions on to its face buttons ('reload' and 'use item' are mapped to the same button). Swords and spears provide the most intimate, intense exchanges, without any interface hassle.

It's testament to *Monster Hunter*'s Guild Quests – the real meat of the game – that such glaring issues can be tolerated. These timed excursions are the key to discovering the meanest and mightiest beasts of the ecology, and increasing your cashflow. Rewards, monetary or otherwise, can be invested in a variety of ways: the simple farming and agriculture sub-system, modification of weapons and armour or mix-and-match potion brewing. The crossover between the singleplayer economy and the action of co-op questing (splitscreen twoplayer is also an option) ultimately elevates *Monster Hunter* above mere grinding, and setting off with buddies to kill a huge dragon is a thrill. Duality is at the heart of *Tri* – it is both tourism and dungeon crawl, reconnaissance and gung-ho attacks, hunter and gatherer, new and old. Full of solitary exploration, it's at its best when played in groups. And so, burdened with Nintendo's expectations, it manages to be that rarest of things: a Wii game you've just got to try online. **[7]**

Your entry into each map is heralded by a rousing orchestral score. After that, other than some tribal beats and rhythms, the music is mostly kept to a minimum, allowing the in-game effects to screech

Bad chow disease



One of *Monster Hunter*'s incidental charms is the portable grill. It's used to cook dead animal meat on the go, and is one of the first and most useful additions to your inventory. Using the grill triggers an on-the-spot animation complete with rotating spit and sizzling joints, and the longer you let the animation continue, the more the meat roasts, to the accompaniment of plinky-plonk music. A good slice of flesh does wonders for the stamina gauge, giving you some vital extra horsepower for escaping the more persistent carnivores. Hunters only like their meat rare, though, so be sure to keep your eye on the egg timer.





The rich, guttural tones of the native Russian language, along with some robust and rugged art design, help evoke a distinct, post-apocalyptic sense of place in a crowded genre





METRO 2033

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: 4A GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E210

Setting an FPS on the literal rails of a transport network may not inspire confidence, but 4A Games' ambitions are grander than the average shooting gallery. Taking as its source material Dmitry Glukhovsky's dystopian novel about a post-nuclear Moscow, *Metro 2033* charts the journey of protagonist Artyom as he journeys both under and over ground to redeem his homeland.

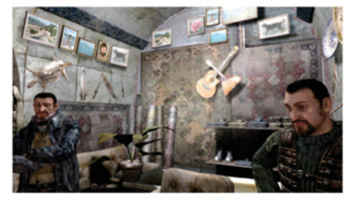
Attempts to realise the source material (the book itself makes a cameo you can't ignore) are made with a gamut of the FPS genre's gimmicks. Scripted scenes are polished and effective, while spooky flashbacks overlay the scenery and present some clichéd but effectively constructed enigmas. This amalgamation of styles spills over into the realtime action, too. Weapons are a melting pot of generic automatics and clunky, aged rifles and shotguns (one is appropriately named the 'bastard'). Combat can be good, bad or ugly depending on the opponent. The animalistic Dark Ones look far more agile than their path-finding caters for, and do little but leap about and take repeated headshots, whereas human opponents present a cacophony of shrapnel and grenade whiteouts.

While mostly a smooth ride, the ambition of the design occasionally stretches the proprietary 4A Engine too far when the scale increases. Though it may be a postcard from a deranged future, many of *Metro*'s problems – collision detection can be a major frustration – are straight out of the past. At peak performance, however, the engine renders the world of *Metro* with nuance and style, from the bright lights and ghostly silhouettes of the opening tunnels to a chilling encounter in a frozen Nazi outpost. There's a distinct sense of place to *Metro*'s underworld, one thick with the fog of a felled civilisation surviving any way it can.

That theme is realised with solid innovations like the gas mask – a manually activated protector against the toxicity of the outside world (you'll make infrequent excursions above the surface to scavenge and traverse the grim backdrop). The implementation is readable and smart: a wristwatch counts down breathing time and filters must be collected to survive extensive exposure. A range of pump-action weapons (requiring simultaneous use of bumper and trigger for extra inconvenience) heighten tension and up the ante in prolonged gunfights. The trading system, however, is a shop in disguise, the basic buying and selling 'market' just another step on the fixed upgrade ladder.

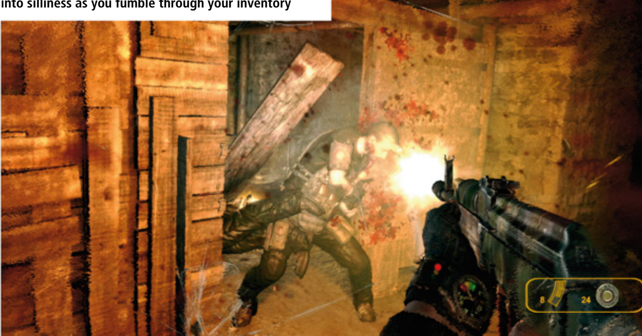
In aiming for realism, a level of user-friendliness has been sacrificed. An objective indicator would have been welcome instead of the compass, map and lighter setup which makes navigating tiered sections of ruined buildings an unintentional nightmare.

Metro is at its best deep underground, away from the demands of a modern action game and engrossed in the cultures that cling to its tunnels, the atmosphere boosted by subtitled Russian and the writing and voice-acting creating fascinating windows into a struggling world. So it's a shame the glimpses are fleeting, the engine seeming more at home with large numbers of stationary characters, lit beautifully and characterised by textured art design. With more to do down there in the doldrums, and a few more intimate stories to tell, *Metro* could have warranted a return ticket. **[6]**



Self-playing guitars make regular appearances and, when triggered, fill the airwaves with serene strumming. It's a minor touch that has major atmospheric merit, alleviating the heavy chatter around crackling fires

Stealth is an option, but not recommended. A dud throwing knife regularly devolves sneakiness into silliness as you fumble through your inventory





The scenes of lurking aliens could be removed without any damage to the story, and lead to an underwhelming payoff. Fortunately they don't come along very often

Piggyback ride or die



One of *Metro*'s strengths is its determination to change the rules of engagement throughout your playtime. In avoiding stagnation, 4A Games throws up some moments of brilliance, such as the section in which Artyom must navigate with the added weight of a piggybacking child. The controls get heavier and the corridors narrower. It's a marriage of form and content that prevents you taking the luxury of standard look-sensitivity for granted and adds urgency to the escape. Such flourishes compensate for the lacklustre area defence sections, though even these are kept short and remixed with dynamic cutscenes that steer the action and raise the pulse.



Weather conditions often restrict vision even more than the invasive HUD, which is a shame as the mixture of old and new units and varied landscapes deserve to be seen





Things can get hectic, and cramped, when missions take in the more ambitiously scaled transporters





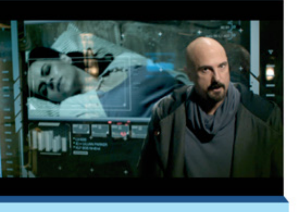


The zoom function may emphasise some detailed textures and pay tribute to animation work, but it's aggravating not to have a much more distant zoom level to co-ordinate some death from above

COMMAND & CONQUER 4: TIBERIAN TWILIGHT

FORMAT: PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** EA
DEVELOPER: EA LOS ANGELES **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E209

Incoming transmission



What was frivolously hammy in *Red Alert 3*, and appropriately cast in *Tiberian Wars*, becomes bland and overly serious in *Command & Conquer 4*. The cutscenes would be excusable if there was a splash of colour here or a George Takei there, but the new war-room focus is too unattractive and sedate to draw any excitement or giggles. Ditching the Battlestar Galactica cast members but attempting to replicate that show's aesthetic is a bold move, but one that falls flat on the canvas of *Command & Conquer*'s pantomime lineage of terrible typecasting and so-bad-it's-good scripting.

The *Twilight* of the title may refer to the overarching story of the Tiberian saga, but it's also a poignant term for the current state of the *Command & Conquer* series. Once the distinguished, conservative of the franchise – *Red Alert* the 'wacky', unpredictable cousin – *Tiberian Twilight* finds the series at a crossroads, with its glory days gone and its future uncertain.

The experience is familiar, regardless of bullet points like profile ranking system and multiplayer. The key to any RTS is translating the art of war into a series of symbols and shortcuts, then marrying these to a satisfying battlefield. *Command & Conquer* has always been solid here, and *Tiberian Twilight* inherits many of the strengths of its crossplatform predecessors, without quite delivering any fresh innovations of its own.

Units are chunky and detailed, if a little behind the current curve for high-end RTS visuals. It's a shame that selecting some units – an engineer overlapped by a tank, for example – can be such tricky business. It's an issue rooted in *Twilight*'s overall art direction. The visuals make it difficult to distinguish between friend and foe, complicating skirmishes and confusing your commands. The wealth of keyboard shortcuts eases the pain through hard labour but seems at odds with the user-friendly, console-centric menus and ranked profiles. Fortunately, brute force cuts through the red tape thanks to the magnificent tank. It's a vehicle you'll rely on regardless of which side you choose.

The pace is punchy. Rank-increasing pickups left behind by felled enemies are a useful incentive to coax users into the gung-ho firefights favoured by the majority of missions. The mobile base units, denominated as Offence, Defence and Support, lead to nomadic skirmishes that are unpredictable at best, infuriating at worst. It means missions regularly descend into trial and error – spy out the landscape with one save and then take care of business with the next. It's a system that belies any sense of strategy and engagement. Without adequately deep tutorial missions, however, it's the most obvious path to take.

The HUD becomes as much an inconvenience as a guide when the going gets tougher. Rather than learn from its *Tiberian Wars* predecessor, *Twilight* opts for a luminous, distracting interface complete with screen-filling pop-up hints that obscure when they should clarify (the HUD toggle is a must). It's the sort of oversight that can be levelled at many aspects of *Tiberian Twilight*. In a bid to stay relevant the developer has looked over the fence into the pen of action-based online gaming, when right under its nose the RTS – with titles like *Supreme Commander* and *Company Of Heroes* – has made some stellar moves towards greater immersion all of its own.

C&C has usually made useful, welcome changes to bridge the time-gap between core releases. With age often comes wisdom, but so too does poor memory and a dulling of the senses. The latest *C&C* may be dressed in new-age clothes, but there's no hiding what's underneath. **[5]**



Mobile base units can make for adaptive play, and you're given numerous chances to respawn them in each mission



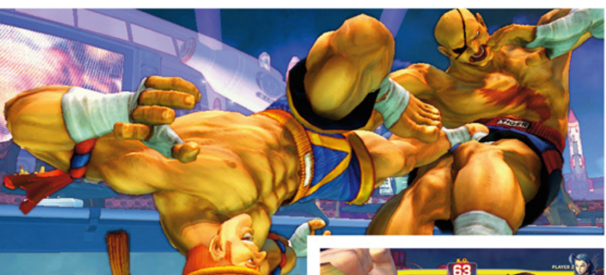


SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: APRIL 30
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E209, E213



All characters are now unlocked from the start, the new levels are loud and bright, and there are character-specific 'special' taunts, like Guile putting on his shades. Bonus stages don't feel as much fun as they did back in the day, however





Each character now has two Ultra attacks, which you choose between, and there are great additions: Ryu's mega dragon punch from *SFIII* returns, while Ken gets a flaming hurricane kick with "One more for good measure!" at the end

It's only been a year, but *Street Fighter IV* is already the defining fighting game of its generation. And here's one of Capcom's most venerable traditions: the upgrade. New and improved *SSFIV* has ten new characters, online modes better geared towards playing with friends, a pacier and less frustrating challenge mode and, most importantly, little tweaks to the existing lineup.

Forget that tier nonsense. This is the most vibrant cast list ever assembled for the sole purpose of breaking heads. The fluid visuals of *SSFIV* morph in and out of styles as they fight, swishing ink one way and stretching a chin like Plasticine in the other. Dust clouds billow at fighters' feet, eyes track opponents constantly, and when hits connect they do so with an almost comedic crack. There's an intoxicating rhythm to the counter-fighting, the millisecond mind games, and the little gaps where you can sneak in a jab, or the big ones when you can go for it Ultra style.

The new fighters slot straight into *SSFIV*'s roster, and not one repeats what's already there. You can smash Ibuki into the corner and brutally dominate, or with cutting flurries she can do exactly the same to you. Juri's like a snake, pouncing and prowling across the stage. Dudley's got dreamily damaging target combos and endless ways to set up his Super. This is brand new, yet it tastes vintage. Because it's nothing less than Capcom at its best in the genre it defines. **[9]**



MEGA MAN 10

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED), WII
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: INTI CREATES

Modern gamers are soft. Just as in *Mega Man 9*, that's the key message of *10*, which seeks to redress that by intimately acquainting players with its Game Over screen. Over and over again.

There's no room for modern rubbish like infinite lives, regenerating health bars or dynamic difficulty levels here. Single enemies can whittle down health in seconds, a mistimed jump results in instant death, and three strikes take you back to that Game Over screen. Again. Ultimately it's a game that will have even hardened veterans of the 8bit era turning the air as blue as its lead character's armour, and it's telling that this is considered the 'normal' difficulty setting.

And yet there is enjoyment to be had for those who like their games to test the mettle as well as provide escapism. Learning the tight rhythm of jumps and shots required to nail the game's eight stages is the key to success. Yes, the odds against Mega Man are great, but it's never unfair and everything is possible given time, practice and application. Few other games, even at their most challenging, offer quite such a high as defeating one of this game's bosses.

For less able players, Capcom has inserted a new easy mode: here, enemies are weaker, Mega Man is stronger and the various pits and spikes are covered with floating platforms. The result is a far less stressful experience but a muted one, too. Without the brutal challenge it's a game that will take mere hours to finish and even fewer to forget. **[6]**





Mega Man and Proto Man are available from the off, but US gamers can download another character, Bass. He updates the game somewhat by firing in seven different directions



FRET NICE

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: TECMO KOEI **DEVELOPER:** PIECES INTERACTIVE

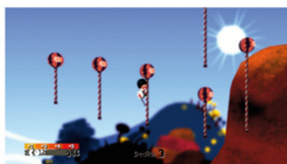


The world's first guitar-controlled platformer won't be heralded by a power chord big enough to level a city but by raucous feedback – much of it bad. It's a clever enough concept – play chords to leap about, attack enemies and score points – but it all falls apart as soon as your character is required to do anything other than play the guitar.

Moving left and right (with the first and third fret) is awkward enough, but jumping (a flick of the guitar's neck) proves downright unresponsive. It's a disastrous misstep considering the obvious emphasis placed on leaping around in a platform game – even more so when you realise that attacks can only be initiated in the air. It also steamrollers flat the set-pieces that should elevate the otherwise uninspired retreading of platform clichés.

It's telling, then, that *Fret Nice* includes the option to use the standard 360 joypad. Thus controlled, you at least get to enjoy the clever combat system. Enemies are defeated by creating a likeness through assembling a sequence of riffs. It feels counter-intuitive that the system uses visual rather than aural cues, but it's an interesting alternative to bottom-bouncing all the same.

But while the more conventional controls make for a more satisfying experience, they also expose the painful ordinariness of the game. Despite a visual language that borrows much from *LittleBigPlanet*'s hand-made aesthetic, the bongo-battering GameCube platformer *Jungle Beat* is arguably its closest relation. Unfortunately, *Fret Nice* lacks the coherence and cleverness of both of those titles and sounds a bum note right from the beginning. **[4]**



Each fret corresponds to a facial feature, so recreating your foe's freakish visage is a matter of stringing together riffs, although it's fairly easy to just spam your way through fights, too



Appropriately enough, the game takes its cues from music: these odd critters (above) resemble speakers, while drum kits are often used as springs

FLOTILLA

FORMAT: PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** BLENDO GAMES
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

The Roguelike is being given new life by independent PC developers, in *Dwarf Fortress*'s inscrutable ASCII, in *Spelunky*'s randomly generated platforming, and now in *Flotilla*. But where those former reinventions kept the adventure in the dungeons, *Flotilla* heads outward with turn-based space combat.

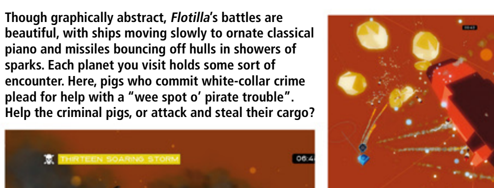
As a space captain with an unexplained terminal illness, you have seven months to go on a final adventure. Hopping from planet to planet on a galactic map brings you face to face with PopCap-style comedy animals, including stowaway toucans, penguin pirates and bitter, legless hippos. These encounters either immediately lead to a battle or offer the player a simple choice: will you give the toucans safe passage or flush them out the airlock? Will you accept a bribe from the pipe-smoking fish slave-traders or fight to stop their evil? The consequences can be immediate, such as a map from a grateful toucan, or delayed, as when an owl attacks you for profiting from the slave trade.

This is the endearing topsoil for a strategy game mainly about directing boxy, pastel-coloured spaceships in small skirmishes via simultaneous turns. Winning battles requires you to target the rear and underside of enemy ships, using only a few complementary manoeuvres. Flank Move allows your ships to move at high speed without firing back, Focus Fire moves a ship only a small distance but with rapid fire, and Attack Move provides a balance of both. What makes it tricky is that enemy ships can be high above you and upside down, and that different ships – one, a Proto Fighter, is a small three-doored hatchback – are useful at different ranges.

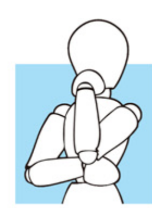
Being arbitrarily limited by your illness frees you to experiment. When the game is destined to end, you may as well investigate that derelict ghost ship. The downside is that upgrades to ships are short-lived. It's frustrating, though it seems a future patch may remove the limit.

For now, it means the game is brief, and although adventures are randomised, encounters quickly begin repeating. The battles, meanwhile, are engaging despite their simplicity, and it's beautiful to watch each turn play out. You'll likely find you've had your fill of singleplayer after a few hours, but if you can find a friend to sit with you can play co-operatively or go head to head in skirmish mode. For its low price, it's a good deal. **[7]**

Though graphically abstract, *Flotilla*'s battles are beautiful, with ships moving slowly to ornate classical piano and missiles bouncing off hulls in showers of sparks. Each planet you visit holds some sort of encounter. Here, pigs who commit white-collar crime plead for help with a "wee spot o' pirate trouble". Help the criminal pigs, or attack and steal their cargo?







ECHOSHIFT

FORMAT: PSP **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE **DEVELOPER:** ARTOON

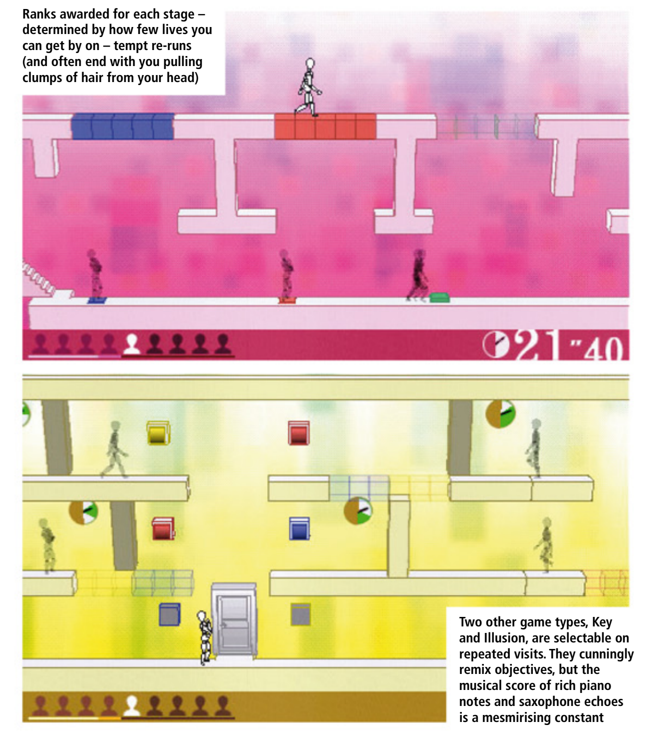
When the mechanics of an online experiment like *Cursor*10* collide with the minimalist chic of Sony's *Echochrome*, *Echoshift* is born. This is a good thing. A game of collaborative reincarnation, in which the ghost of your previous life – or 'Bounce' – has their actions repeated in your next run (raise a platform before death, save yourself the legwork in the afterlife), *Echoshift* builds a series of progressively tricky puzzle rooms around its conceit.

Initially, however, the high concept is laboured, the opening stages a little too easy and the learning curve a touch too soft. But before long the challenge ramps up, and your sense of satisfaction increases proportionately. Colour-coded switches become the priority and you're forced to think four, never mind two, steps ahead. It's an odd rhythm to adapt to, synchronising yourself with your other selves, and one that never relaxes into a comfort zone.

The temptation is to dash through stages like your lives depend on it, but Artoon has a different pace in mind. The instrumental backing track and leisurely stroll of your faceless 'Walkers' forces a slighter hand and a level of patience that counters time-attack instincts. The wireframe stages are reminiscent of a Sudoku grid and the button-pressing equations have a similar trial-and-error basis. Shifting platforms, deadly gaps and foes that hover on fixed routes (and look like scrunched-up homework assignments) present prickly scenarios later on, stretching your nerves like a Monday morning test.

The sterile presentation may be part of *Echoshift*'s mathematical groove, but when motivation is waning and the pressure's piling on you'd welcome more personality. When you do surrender to *Echoshift*'s world of relaxation, time management, and jarring cruelty, however, time – like your many lives – flies by. **[7]**

Ranks awarded for each stage – determined by how few lives you can get by on – tempt re-runs (and often end with you pulling clumps of hair from your head)



Two other game types, Key and Illusion, are selectable on repeated visits. They cunningly remix objectives, but the musical score of rich piano notes and saxophone echoes is a mesmirising constant



DEAD OR ALIVE PARADISE

FORMAT: PSP **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: TECMO **DEVELOPER:** PROJECT VENUS



Old, new and blue: *DOA Paradise* has an insatiable desire for flesh that would make a zombie blush. The sleazier the outfit, the more it costs



Once more unto the beach: the only thing more ridiculous than the 'unearthing' of Zack Island is the fate that awaits it when your 14 days end

Back in 2003, *Dead Or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball* was a breath of fresh sea-air and a remedy to stagnated retail charts. With its dating-sim progression ladder and intuitive, addictive volleyball, it offered something unique and subversive. Now, on PSP, that same cocktail isn't quite so potent, or tasty.

It's a shame because *Dead Or Alive Paradise* is an immaculate port. Spanning a two-week break on Zack Island, you take control of a *Dead Or Alive* girl (plus a new addition who helps out struggling beginners) and attempt to flirt yourself to a volleyball partner. You'll spend as much time researching the girls' tastes – from drinks to confectionery – as you will slamming serves over the net in the blazing sunshine.

The simple attack-defend volleyball games are the true beauty of Zack Island, frequently raising the pulse as you battle to deliver that killer blow. There's a parallel to be drawn between the timed inputs of traditional *Dead Or Alive* fights, and the remarkably animated character models further tease what a *DOA* fighter would be like on PSP. It's a shame you can't just cut to the volleyball; though you may be master of the girls' daily procrastinations, you're also a slave to the island's rigid structure and curfew, allowing no more than three activities per day.

The time since Team Ninja's first trip to Zack Island has seen the continual rise of the minigame, across all platforms and at budget price-points which render the offerings here – a diluted casino without tutorials, a basic pool-hopping section – miserly in the face of the competition. Though the climate on Zack Island may still be tropical, and the ambience still chilled, *DOA Paradise* may find itself on stormy seas trying to stay afloat at retail. **[6]**

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BOY
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TIME EXTEND



POKÉMON RED/BLUE

FORMAT: **GAME BOY**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **GAME FREAK**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **1996**

Forward-thinking and complicated but technologically basic, did these trained monsters pave the way for trained brains and Nintendogs?

When Pokémon arrived in the west it was already a franchise, an attractively wrapped, Pikachu-adorned package of games, TV shows, toys, films and lunchboxes. It can be tempting to overlook that *Pokémon Red* and *Blue* were indie underdogs once, made by a tiny, almost-bankrupt team for a technologically limited handheld seemingly at the end of its lifecycle. And like many of Nintendo's more recent handheld blockbusters, the games' astronomical success at retail wasn't instant, but the result of slow-burning but continuous sales over the course of years. Pioneering community interaction in an age prior to the mass popularisation of the internet, they were truly mainstream videogames, embodying the inclusive ethos that has since made their publisher very rich indeed. But *Pokémon*'s popularity is mystifying from the outside. How did a quirky, number-heavy, labour-intensive strategy game make its name as something for the kids?

To find what it is about *Pokémon* that's so captivating, look at what its many imitators do wrong. They bombard the player with hundreds of collectible critters, for a start, but it wasn't mere quantity of content that drove Pokédex obsessives. They engineer cutesy, bright character design, but that wasn't part of *Red* and *Blue*'s appeal – there was literally no room for bright colours and zingy effects on a three-and-a-bit-centimetre Game Boy screen. They encourage you to fight and trade with your friends, but often pare the combat down to a basic slapping contest and reduce creatures' individuality to little more than a name. Its rivals have always failed to understand that, ultimately, it's the complexity that makes *Pokémon* so consuming, and that the basic presentation actually contributes to its appeal. The complete absence of pretty audiovisual stimulation leaves room for the imagination – of child or adult – to work its magic.





The original *Pokémon* sprites often bear very little resemblance to their hyper-colourful equivalents in pop-culture Pokémon – Pikachu, particularly, was given a considerable makeover in the time between *Red* and *Blue*'s release and the anime series' debut



MEET THE TEAM

Nestled between two nondescript buildings in Celadon City is Pokémon Mansion, home to the game's very own version of the Game Freak offices. The first-floor placard reads 'Game Freak Meeting Room', and on the second floor there's a graphic artist, story writer and programmer hard at work, as well as a designer who dispenses the prized Pokédex completion diploma. This isn't the only instance of self-insertion in the game: in the Japanese versions, the player character's default name is Satoshi (after Tajiri), and his rival is named Shigeru (after Miyamoto, who worked in a supervisory role during *Red* and *Blue*'s development; the full extent of his involvement, though, remains unknown).

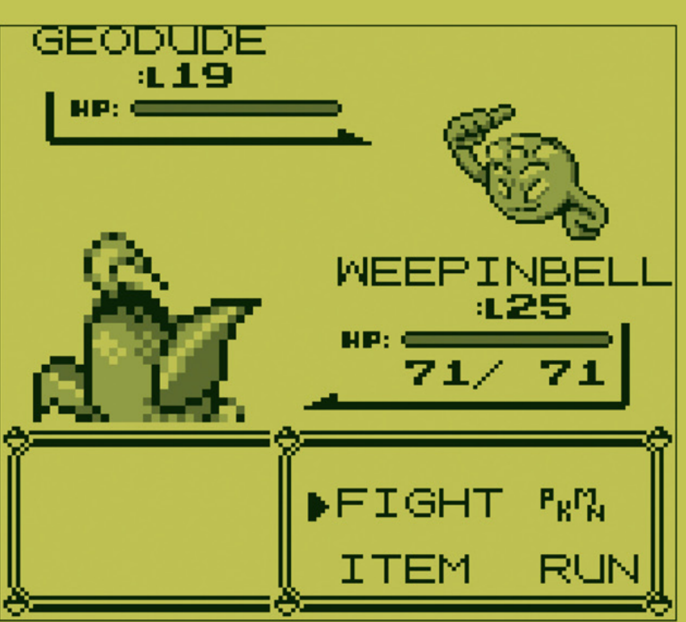
Red* and *Blue also have a rather unexpected sense of place that transcends technical limitations and goes some way towards explaining their absorbing nature. The plot is hardly a masterclass in interactive storytelling, and the inhabitants of the games' world rarely trouble the player with more than a line or two of inane conversation, but Kanto is nonetheless a believable, cohesive place. The symbiotic relationship between humans and Pokémon permeates every aspect of its inhabitants' lives, often in touching ways – witness Lavender Town, where the mourning owners of dead Pokémon come to honour them at a giant commemorative tower. The towns and cities have character despite their drab appearance, from Pallet Town's provincial houses to the enormous Celadon department store, which bears an eerie resemblance to the giant Pokémon Centre superstores that would eventually sprout up in New York and Tokyo. In depicting a world in which nobody could talk about anything but Pokémon, Game Freak proved oddly prescient.

And just how complicated is *Pokémon*? There's a vast amount to memorise: not just the 151 Pokémon names, but their types, which moves they can learn, and which are strong against which others. Then there are the various items and their disparate effects, and the PC-based Pokémon management system. Playing *Red* and *Blue* often feels like a series of ruthless mathematical calculations. To what extent will a type advantage compensate for a level deficit? Exactly how many more hits can this Pokémon survive before switching it out? Which distribution of XP is most beneficial for the team? What percentage chance of a critical hit does this move have in this situation? There are numbers, numbers everywhere – hit points, power points, stat points, numbered Technical Machines that teach new moves – all forming one massively complicated equation within a tiny 1MB cartridge. *Pokémon* is the world's most popular form of algebra.

Why would any sane child or adult put up with this level of mathematics and memorisation? Partly because it's so mentally stimulating, and partly because it's the numbers that make *Pokémon* such a personal experience. No two creatures are quite the same; each starts with slightly different stats, and the way it's raised moulds those numbers accordingly. It's no accident that this makes every caught Pokémon subtly different, and allowing the player to name them only strengthens their individuality. It's the stat sheet that distinguishes a well-loved, champion-quality level-68 Charizard from a trade-acquired, lazily raised equivalent. Aside from naming the trainer at the beginning of the game, the player has no input into his appearance or development. Instead, it's the choice of Pokémon and the way that they're raised that reflect each player's personality, tastes and commitment. A strong Pokémon team represents hundreds of hours of hard work and careful decisions. They're nothing other than a personal expression.

Lead designer Satoshi Tajiri once compared *Pokémon* to a new bike – everyone wants to take it someplace different – and the game's level of personalisation makes that possible despite the fairly rigid constraints of its story structure. The tale of a young boy rising from nothing is hardly new, but *Pokémon* makes it the player's own: from that very first choice between Bulbasaur, Squirtle and Charmander in Professor Oak's office, the adventure is yours. Like most stories that resonate with kids, it endows them with power and control, and teaches the capability to make a success of yourself through investing your care and energy in something else. *Pokémon* is unquestionably one of the best children's games ever made, but like all the best Nintendo titles its appeal isn't limited. It's not just for the young, but for the young at heart.

A strong Pokémon team represents hundreds of hours of hard work and careful decisions. They're nothing other than a personal expression





The inhabitants of Kanto need only the barest of provocations to start a fight. Wandering into their line of sight is usually enough to kick one off





Pokémon's world is entirely self-contained. Designer Satoshi Tajiri makes reference to the real world only in the pretend development team housed in Celadon City's Pokémon Mansion, and in the self-referential naming of *Red* and *Blue*'s protagonist and antagonist (see 'Meet the team'). Battling other trainers makes grinding feel like less of a chore

Trading and battling with others reinforces this individuality (and has the extremely beneficial side effect of persuading people to buy more than one copy, which publishers have been trying and usually failing to replicate ever since). *Red* and *Blue* were among the first games to recognise that sharing experiences makes games much more engaging – something that entire genres now capitalise upon. Trading isn't just an optional aspect of *Pokémon*, it's at the very core of its design (and, of course, its trademark dual-release strategy). Moment to moment, the game presents choices that close off other options forever, making the dream of a complete collection impossible without a network of companions.

As well as an understanding of playground politics, *Pokémon*'s emphasis on trading and sharing represents an inspired reinvention of the Game Boy link cable: Game Freak took a piece of technology that had exclusively been used for competition and made it about communication instead. It's a philosophy that Nintendo has adopted in a wider sense in the 14 years since *Pokémon* made its original appearance, moving the videogame industry away from infighting and towards expansion and inclusiveness. *Red* and *Blue*'s influence on the company and its most prominent designers is evident in everything from *Nintendogs* to *Animal Crossing*. *Red* and *Blue* made communication into an essential part of handheld videogames, prefiguring the community mentality and interdependency that the internet would later make widespread.

Not every Pokémon proved memorable. Who remembers Paras, or Weepinbell? But the world remembers *Pokémon Red* and *Blue*, and not just as a peripheral, irritating commercial phenomenon or as meaningless child's play. These unusual games were forward-thinking before they were wildly successful, to the extent that the series continues with only iterative updates, and their design principles have since been reflected across an astonishing amount of the industry's output. Sometimes, the most unlikely candidates for success become the most bankable properties. Because sometimes it's the most unfamiliar and complicated things that set the imagination alight.

Red and *Blue*'s cities are named after vibrant colours, which can seem rather melancholy on the Game Boy's tiny, monochrome screen. Each location's character is defined to a large extent by the local gym and its owner, who you must defeat to earn gym badges





POPULAR SECRETS

Mew, the 151st Pokémon, is one of the most keenly discussed of all game characters. Game Freak and Nintendo circulated rumours for months in an effort to build up hype and keep interest in the game at a frenzied peak. For years it was only possible to obtain Mew through Nintendo promotional events, but a glitch was subsequently discovered that triggers a battle with a wild one. There is one more 'secret' Pokémon in *Red* and *Blue*: MissingNO, a mathematical accident of the game's programming that caused save-game corruption and appeared onscreen as a smear of distorted pixels. Capturing a MissingNO, which appears as number 000 in the Pokédex, became a badge of honour for the most dedicated Pokémon collectors, largely thanks to the substantial risk of losing your save.


TrackMania Nations
NADEO
RECARO
2

THE MAKING OF...
TRACKMANIA

How a studio without money, experience or artists started the world's most loyal car club

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **DIGITAL JESTERS** DEVELOPER: **NADEO** ORIGIN: **FRANCE** RELEASE: **2003**

The story of a famous motorist always begins with numbers. At the time of writing, the number of tracks available for *TrackMania United Forever*, the latest version of Nadeo's virtual slot-car racer, is 168,813. That's three more than when we began writing this article, and 309 fewer than it'll be when it's finished. A monster of user-generated content that predates even the term itself (at least in mainstream usage), it's also an object lesson in how to grow, regulate, support and sustain an online community. Not bad for a studio which, recalls founder **Florent Castelnerac**, "knew pretty much nothing of making videogames" when the wheels started turning.

Instead, Nadeo's expertise lay in CG movie and TV production, which it realised gave it an engine with much wider capabilities. "We'd made videogame technology to make a cartoon," says Castelnerac, "so we should really make a videogame as well." The developer had no experience, "no money" and little idea of what that game should be. "We didn't even have any graphics artists. We had one and then he left."

TrackMania, then, is the racer you invent when you can't make a racer. "The biggest thing for us was making tools to create something quickly. We started making the simplest game we could envision, a racer, then realised the value of giving the tools away as well." He laughs. "Then we realised that's all the value we had."

With such a barely defined kernel to build a studio around – an editor-based prototype stalled with publishers – Castelnerac had some big questions for early interviewees. "I said to one guy: 'If you can find a mode halfway between building and driving, we'll make a prototype together'. He came up with Puzzle [the mode in which you build *and* drive between two isolated points] and from day one I thought it was a problem. People like to think or they like to drive, but very seldom do you find them enjoying both at the same time. It was something, though, so we started with that."

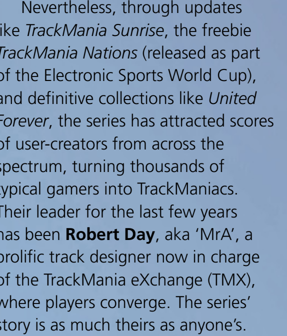
> "Every time I changed it, something new would appear and something else would disappear – but it was always fun"

An asynchronous multiplayer game as much about trading as lap times, *TrackMania* is nothing if not incremental. Building a working model "in about three hours," Castelnerac talks about physics rather than handling. "When it's truly physical, it stops being an imitation of a real thing. Every time I changed it, something new would appear and something else would disappear – but it was always fun. The gameplay in the first one was quite sensitive, though. You had to be pretty stressed to play it at its best."

The famous control scheme, meanwhile, which hands complete car control to the cursor keys, initially went even further. Picturing the game on consoles as well as computers, Nadeo designed the whole thing – driving, editing and frontend







navigation – around the keyboard, only later adding the mouse. One thing it knew from the off, though: *TrackMania* needed a different look to the studio's actual debut, the publisher-commissioned naval simulator *Virtual Skipper 3*.

"We were more focused on that because it was a sim, and on *TrackMania* we kind of gave up. We needed nice graphics but not great graphics. If you try to make impressive graphics, you'll probably end up making graphics that get older quicker, so there's a balance to be struck." That said, people often overlook the complexities of an engine built to build as well as race. Even Castelnerac himself, he admits, remembering a conversation with a man who made *Forza Motorsport 3*.

"He came up to me while I was presenting *TrackMania 2* and I commended him on the lighting in his game. He says: 'Yeah, we just hired a guy from Blizzard to do that'. And it took me a while to understand that, that they're able to direct that stuff themselves, to put light where they want light. To me, light is all about computation and calculation. You can't design it, you can't decide you want it here and there. For a track editor you *have* to compute everything, you can't expect the player to put lights all over the place."

Dynamic light and shadow have been mixed blessings for *TrackMania*. On one hand, they've produced one of the most polished-looking racing games on any platform, able to blend the most twisted user creations into flawless, lifelike venues. But on the other, admits Castelnerac, it's hurt the game's accessibility – surely its most precious resource – during the growth of the laptop as a gaming platform. "We suffered, I think, because we had Intel putting crappy graphics hardware in laptops, and people wanting smaller screens. And we suffered with Vista. It was a difficult time."

"There's lots of people who drive and race without making anything at all, and they take their racing very seriously"

Nevertheless, through updates like *TrackMania Sunrise*, the freebie *TrackMania Nations* (released as part of the Electronic Sports World Cup), and definitive collections like *United Forever*, the series has attracted scores of user-creators from across the spectrum, turning thousands of typical gamers into TrackManiacs. Their leader for the last few years has been **Robert Day**, aka 'MrA', a prolific track designer now in charge of the TrackMania eXchange (TMX), where players converge. The series' story is as much theirs as anyone's.

"My sister was reading a magazine in late 2003, and she saw *TrackMania* and said she'd like to try it," recalls Day. "So I got it for her and found I rather liked it myself. It was immediately playable and the editor attracted me because I've always enjoyed making things in games, whether it's *Doom* mods or whatever. Track creation in *TrackMania* is really easy: technically, anyone can make them. So it's an artistic thing that you're doing."

Next to Nadeo's, Day's tale is entirely straightforward. He made decent tracks, uploaded them to the original TMX, got talking to webmaster MrD, and ended up running the place himself. At 35, he doesn't see this as a more mature community – "There are definitely kids because we have to deal with them when they don't behave" – and denies it's more about building than playing. "There's lots of people who drive and race without making anything at all, and they take their racing very seriously. I think the making and sharing, a lot of it is about feedback and recognition. We have a system on the website called Awards, where people leave awards for tracks they like, and some people check in three or four times an hour to see if they've got any."

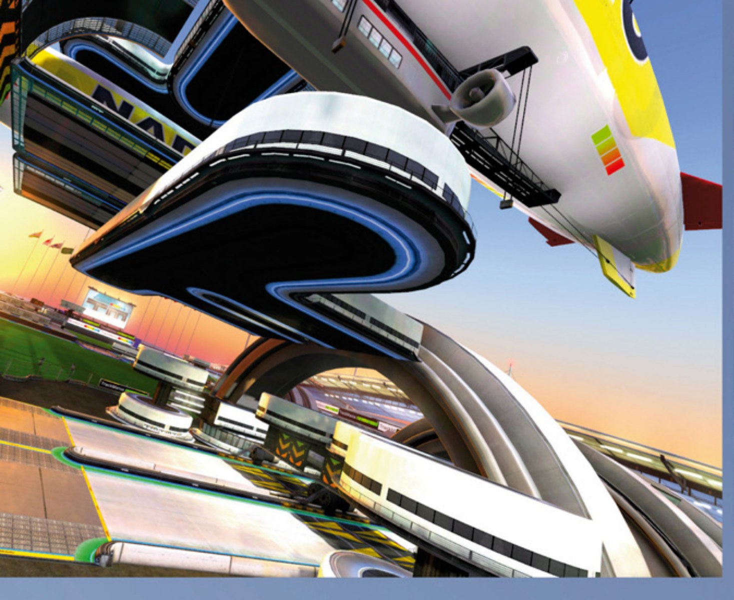
TrackMania has never, of course, dabbled in real-world currency. None of its content, official or otherwise, is a micro-transaction. Nadeo has been dogged by requests from big-name publishers to support consoles, says Castelnerac, for which the micropayment model is an obvious fit, "but that was never our goal. We put a virtual currency [known as coppers] in to help the community organise itself."

Awarded as content-sharing bonuses, tournament prizes and incentives to simply sign in and play, coppers have proved massively successful, transactions each day representing "hundreds of thousands of online hours," says Castelnerac. "They're so powerful, even for moderation. In no game can you moderate as efficiently as you can with this tool – because here you can ask people to make a deposit, and if they break the rules then you keep that deposit. You can't do that with a serial number or game key. It would be like the UK saying that if you did













***TrackMania*'s community has amassed all kinds of weird and wonderful vehicles, from *Wipeout* ships to Sonic The Hedgehog and Tim Burton's Batmobile. All free, via a handful of websites**

something wrong, you're banned from the country."

Coppers are a support mechanism, he insists, not a trick to promote jealously or a competitive hierarchy. "And the weird thing is they do have some value," says Day. "When they made the StarTracks add-on [a community-created, player-elected, Nadeo-published track 'campaign'] and wanted to charge 30-40 coppers a day to use it, people were outraged. And I'm thinking, hang on, they've got something here if people are getting that bothered."

Indeed, it's hard to offend the *TrackMania* community. So hard, in fact, that the game's open advocacy of DRM – the pilloried StarForce, now replaced by Nadeo's own code – has, if anything, fastened its loyalty. As famous as the game is for blurring lines between user and creator, more remarkable is where it chooses to draw those lines. It's actually one of most tightly regulated games of its time, its building blocks, rules and code set in stone. And if we're talking numbers, the most impressive has to be zero, the number of times the game's been properly cracked.

The most surprising number: sales. In its first six months, the original *TrackMania* shifted just 20,000 units, and it took until 2009 for the series to pass the million mark. Castelnerac: "A lot of people at the distribution and publishing end were really disappointed [by the first game], and it was exactly the same with *Sunrise*: they thought we'd sell a lot and we didn't." Yet it kept on selling, and with *United* the story was reversed: "No one believed but it sold really well, and three years later it's still selling. Over the last three months, more regular players came into the paid version of *United* than in the first three years of *TrackMania*." DRM, it follows, as well as being an integral part of early *TrackMania*, might also have been its saviour.

The key to a successful anti-piracy policy, like any high-stakes ceasefire, is mutually assured destruction. "It would be disastrous if [*TrackMania*] were hacked to bits," Day says, "and you joined the server and there were all sorts of things happening. It would destroy it." But you can't rely on gamers to understand that right away, especially when you're a struggling independent, which is why Nadeo's first publisher, Digital Jesters, brought StarForce to the table. Explaining its existence in even the free *TrackMania Nations*, Castelnerac confirms its role: to protect the game, not the profits.

"A lot of players wish it was still there because it guarded us from cheating and so on," he says. "But we'd developed enough in-house tech that we didn't need it. We were independent; we wanted to be independent from StarForce. We wanted to say we could release our game forever without asking someone for help. We wanted to be pure."

That said, enjoy it while it lasts. A new age of *TrackMania* begins in 2011 with the game's first proper sequel, *TrackMania 2* (see 'Split second'), to be published by Nadeo's new owner, Ubisoft. Castelnerac's ambivalence towards the publisher's new DRM is obvious: he's optimistic but sees online-only singleplayer DRM as "irrational", and worries, what with some publishers' track records, about keeping its servers online. But he has no such doubts about his own.

"When we did *United*, we said that all of *TrackMania* was just one piece of software. I've never thought of *TrackMania 2* as a newer, bigger version, I see it as a new start. *TM1* is a story of almost six, seven years of development. *TM2* is the next big adventure."



As its universe expands, banners, logos and visual quality separate *TrackMania*'s generations. *United Forever: Star Edition*, the latest version for sale on Steam, throws all its assets and history together

SPLIT SECOND

Revealed in Paris last year, *TrackMania 2* hopes to capitalise on an upturn in PC gaming's fortunes, driven by changes in its hardware. The game's new splitscreen mode is already running at 50 frames per second on Nvidia's pint-sized Ion platform, says Castelnerac. "That's a $200 computer with HDMI output. They're going to get smaller and cheaper, with fewer mechanical parts and energy consumption. So we're doing the splitscreen with that in mind, for when people use the PC for that kind of fun. If experiences like that start coming back to PC, then things get really interesting."

Day, meanwhile, speaking for a community waiting for its rebirth, is excited by the sequel's building-block creation features. "It's funny because if you ask Florent about that, he'll say the blocks aren't important – and if you go back to early versions of the game or the free version, the block space is quite limited. He'll say it's more about the races and the rules, yet everybody asks for more blocks. So that's going to be very interesting, and it'll be interesting how they get shared, how big the files are and how they get integrated into the track."

Other features include custom radiosity for the game's lighting, and the tentatively titled HQ Shooter, a more advanced movie-making studio inspired by Nadeo's recent work on another CG movie.





TMX webmaster Robert Day (left) and Nadeo founder and director Florent Castelnerac, an indie at heart despite Ubisoft's involvement



Crossing the streams

Can bringing together players running the same game on different devices give Namco Networks the edge?



Kromrey joined Namco from Apple where he was producer and designer on *Texas Hold 'Em* – a rare firstparty App. When the company shut down his group, he moved many of his team across to Namco, providing a valuable understanding of the world of One Infinite Loop


www.namcogames.com

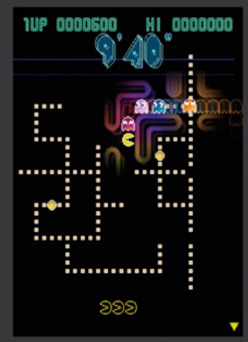
Between the likes of OpenFeint, Ngmoco's Plus+ Network and Chillingo's Crystal platform, the App Store is filling up with proprietary in-App social networks, allowing iPhone gamers to keep track of achievements, build friends lists and even make DLC purchases. You could be forgiven for assuming that the market had already reached a saturation point – or at least a stalemate, with the audience hopelessly split between different services.

Yet the battle continues, as many publishers begin to realise that the right community software might be every bit as important as the individual games themselves. Plus+ has already been instrumental in seeing Ngmoco shift its business structure from charging for games towards a 'freemium' model entirely supported by microtransactions, and now Namco's getting involved too.

With the release of its new UniteSDK technology, the company's entering the community middleware fray, and it thinks it has the edge. "With things like OpenFeint and Crystal being established on the iPhone, it's great to see them connecting players on a device-to-device basis," says **Jonathan Kromrey**, general manager at Namco Networks America. "That's fine. We think we're providing a similar community and allowing players to get in touch with each other with UniteSDK. But we also feel that what everyone else is doing is rather limited in scope."

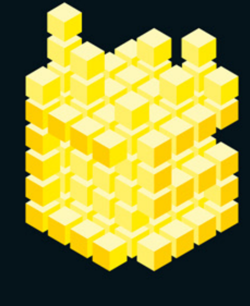
UniteSDK has a much wider remit, throwing standard community elements like friends lists, leaderboards and chat together with something a lot more ambitious: crossplatform play. "We're not only doing iPhone to iPhone, we're reaching out to iPhone to PC, iPhone to Mac, PC to Mac and all the future mobile phones – anything Java-enabled or BREW-enabled," Kromrey explains. "Basically, there's 700 million devices that are just Java and BREW-focused, and combined with a billion PCs and Macs, and 55 to 80 million iPhones and iPod Touch devices, that's an amazing amount of people that can be connecting over games and enjoying multiplayer. That's the reach those other solutions don't have."

The SDK is the product of a collaboration between all three groups

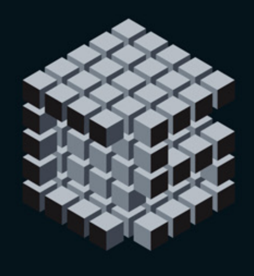


Crossplatform play between *Pac-Man CE* on XBLA and iPhone is a tempting prospect for the new SDK, which also supports international language text chat. "It's not just about creating a great experience per-game and per-platform," Kromrey explains, "but opening it up to a global audience too"



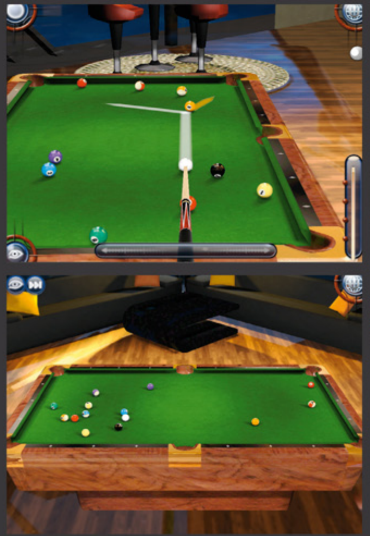






at Namco Networks, shaped by input from the company's Apple, PC and mobile teams, and while there's currently only a few crossplatform games in development, Kromrey feels that his company's making a fairly safe bet on current trends. "This technology scales much higher than simply connecting browser games. We feel players want to play together, regardless of what they're playing on, so we think the crossplatform future is pretty bright. I can see a time when the platform is agnostic, where it doesn't matter what you're using to get into the game, whether it's your Blackberry, your iPhone or even your console."

UniteSDK has been initially rolled out with *Pool Pro Online 3*, currently available on both PC and iPhone, with an Android port due in the next few weeks. The game's been created by Namco's internal Apple group, Order of Magnitude, and although each platform's version will have bespoke interfaces, presentations and control methods, they all use the same physics and rule-sets, allowing for an even playing field from one device to the next. "What's important is to have that tailored experience for your platform," Kromrey asserts. "Obviously there are strengths and weaknesses to doing a game on





Website profile pages will allow UniteSDK's players to keep track of achievements, leaderboards, and game lists in one place across titles like *Pool Pro Online 3* (pictured). A huge appeal of social software is the ability to use the platform as a means of DRM: useful given the rampant nature of App Store piracy



"I can see a time when the platform is agnostic, where it doesn't matter what you use to get into the game"

iPhone, with the touch controls and the size of the screen. What we're doing is creating an SDK that provides for each of those different platforms on their own strengths, to allow for the right experience on each one."

While Java and BREW versions of *Pool Pro Online 3* will probably utilise a top-down perspective, there's plenty of scope for asset-sharing between the higher-end versions. "We actually started with higher-resolution art when we were developing for the iPhone because we knew we were going to bring it to other platforms," Kromrey says. "Measuring twice and cutting once: that's made it very simple for us to port it across to the PC, the Mac, Android, the iPad and beyond. And I like the little things, so if I'm on the PC and I change the table felt, the stick I'm using and how much money I'm betting on each game, all of those changes are kept in the cloud, and they're there when I play on the iPhone. It's like I never left the game."

The plan is to eventually roll out the SDK to licensees, but Namco's already sharing the technology with its internal publishing partners. "We're working closely with our sister company Namco Bandai Games, which handles the console side of things, and we're very excited about that future," Kromrey says, adding that retrofitting UniteSDK into existing games is all part of the design. "I can only really talk about our plans for the iPhone with regards to retrofitting at the moment," he laughs, "but we are planning on going back and adding it to some of our older games there. With over 20 million units sold through the App Store, we have a great userbase, so adding UniteSDK gives players a pool of immediate friends."

With licensed titles such as *TNA Wrestling* and *Despicable Me* coming out in the next few months featuring the new tech, alongside several unannounced projects, the veteran publisher's clearly putting its weight behind crossplatform social gaming. Until licensees have a chance to get involved, however, it remains to be seen whether Namco's SDK genuinely has what it takes to unite such a fractured marketplace.

Social engineering

As ever, there are two different design challenges to take into account with community software: usability for developers, and accessibility for players. "You can't forget the end user, so one of the things we engineered from the beginning is a single log-on," Kromrey says.

"You only have to log in once, and then you're automatically connected whenever you start that App again. There's not this complicated sign-on every time, and it actually runs within the App so you don't have to exit it to chat with someone. We think that makes it much more seamless and friendly, when you can manage friends lists and things from the games."

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

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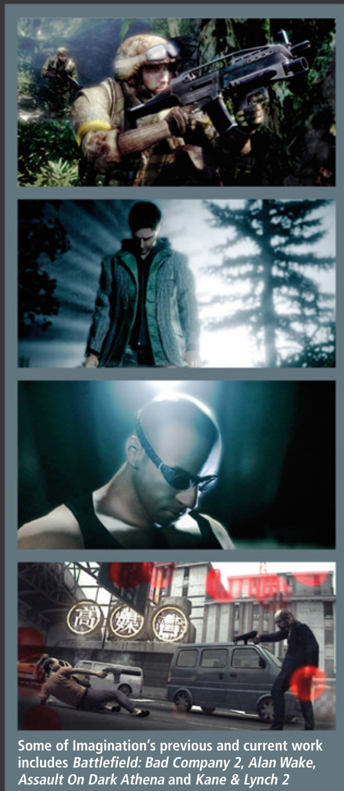
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 21

KEY STAFF: John Klepper (CEO/founder), Anniken Gjelstad (COO), Christian Sjöström (technical director), Nataska Statham (producer)



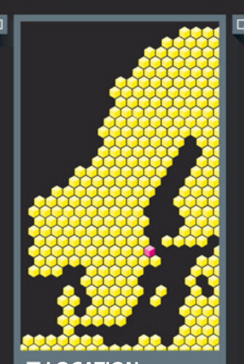
URL: www.imaginationstudios.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:
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Some of Imagination's previous and current work includes *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*, *Alan Wake*, *Assault On Dark Athena* and *Kane & Lynch 2*

IMAGINATION STUDIOS



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CURRENT PROJECTS:
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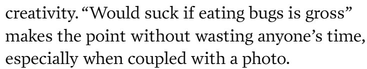
HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

Where do baby videogames come from?

BY RANDY SMITH

When a man videogame and a woman videogame love each other very much, sometimes they lie down together in a special way, and nine months later a new videogame comes into the world! Usually it doesn't happen that way, though.

Spider's path from seed to birth was more typical. It started as just a couple of sentences, one entry in a large brainstorm pool of concepts. We selected three or four of these micro-pitches based on intuition about which were most promising, then spent a weekend writing up 'treatments'. *Spider*'s treatment described mechanics for walking on walls and ceilings, constructing webs and catching insects. I like working in PowerPoint for this early documentation because it encourages brevity and use of images, whereas Word encourages full sentences no one cares to read and complete thoughts which leave less room for the team's creativity. "Would suck if eating bugs is gross" makes the point without wasting anyone's time, especially when coupled with a photo.



> Sometimes you're in search of a game on a particular topic. A heartbreaking game about being a fish, perhaps

Spider's treatment resonated more than its competitors. We sensed there was a systems-based action-adventure game somewhere in there. We prototyped the basic mechanics and found them particularly compelling after we added 'swipe to jump', which wasn't in the original treatment but ultimately became the foundation for all gameplay. The other concepts faded, and we switched on to *Spider* full bore.

In contemplating Game #2, Tiger Style is taking a somewhat more sophisticated approach, modelled after 'discovery', a project phase I learned about at EA. Normally, project phases officially start at pre-production, in which you figure out how the game will be made: ironing out most of the design uncertainty and technical feasibility questions, nailing down the look, making sure it fits in schedule and budget, and stuff like that. Once those questions are answered, pre-pro hands off to the production phase, in which the fire hose of money is turned on, so you'd better know what you're doing. Note that starting at pre-production assumes you've already got a game idea in mind. In discovery, you go out in search of a game worth pursuing.

Sometimes you're in search of a game on a particular topic with particular qualities. A heartbreaking game about being a fish, perhaps. Your job is to figure out what specific design gets you there. Is it a platformer with a significant fluid sim component in which you fight your way up river to spawn? A firstperson swimming game where you bonk repeatedly against the glass walls of your prison? Find a workable design, ideally the best design, and you can hand off from discovery to pre-pro.

This time Tiger Style is taking a more indulgent approach: a big game hunt for the best concept in our territory. Which isn't to say we're starting with a blank slate and a clean hard drive. Once again we have a list of brainstorms, and *Spider*'s code makes a great prototyping base. In many ways the process is similar: we discuss possibilities, we write treatments, we build prototypes. The biggest difference is how far we run with each idea. For *Spider*, we basically wandered straight into committing to the shipping game without exploring the side passages much. This time we actively hope for a litter of aborted attempts at various degrees of completion. We have more and lengthier discussions, and we watch for ideas that blossom into excitement about possible features, moments of gameplay and artistic meaning. We favour ideas that give us a clear sense of how to explore the concept.

So far we've built about three prototypes. In games, no matter how smart you are, especially if your idea is remotely innovative, documents don't cut it. It's crucial to have software to interact with. Every game concept contains peril that could prove fatal. Is this point of view too abstract, or do players enjoy filling in the details with their imagination? Are players unsure what's expected of them, or do the modes weave together intuitively? Prototypes answer questions like these, primarily when you hand them off and watch someone muddle through. Even a crappy, broken prototype should be capable of exciting players if the underlying concept is awesome enough. And the path to creating such a prototype speaks volumes about what building the full game will be like.

We have treatments, concept art, research, mocked-up screenshots, and prototypes, all duct-taped together in a messy clump and struggling to represent key aspects of some unborn videogame. Seeing them side by side is a fantastic way to determine which is the best match for our creative goals, is feasible to build with our resources, is a flexible design that can be taken in several directions and has the best chance of succeeding in the market.

On the other hand, this type of discovery is like starting a few different games without actually making any of them, so it's expensive. At some point you just have to get caught up in intuition and excitement and promote your favourite to pre-production.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, *is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch*





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TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

It's been emotional

BY STEVEN POOLE

Since at least *Final Fantasy VII*, an argument has been abroad that 'emotional' content is what signals (or will signal) videogames' 'maturity'. But this idea, lately rampant in the mainstream coverage of *Chubby Drizzle*, often conflates two very different processes – depicting emotion (in the game's 'characters') versus evoking emotion (in the player). When such discussions do explicitly centre on the player's response, meanwhile, we find a crude unreflective hierarchy of emotion built in– at the top of which sits, for some reason, crying.

So, wait, why would crying at a videogame represent the summit of player experience? One may cry at the most meretricious and manipulative Hollywood scene featuring a dog or small child, but that doesn't prove it's a work of art. Conversely, I did not weep while watching Apocalypse Now or reading The Master And Margarita. Why is crying thought superior to, or more authentic than, laughing, or feeling terrified, or joyously triumphant, or experiencing what I have argued is the central emotional territory of many of the best videogames, the emotion of aesthetic wonder?

> Why is crying thought superior to, or more authentic than, laughing, or feeling terrified, or joyously triumphant?

This strange ideal of the sobbing gamer is perhaps ascribable to a mystifying anxiety among some of gaming's promoters. A mainstream newspaper review of *BioShock 2*, for example, contained the cringeworthy claim: 'There is an ongoing argument about whether games can be considered as literature, and this one presents by far the most compelling case yet for "yes".' Here, the term 'literature' is presumably being used synecdochically to mean 'culture' or 'art', because otherwise the claim is absurd. But it is probably from literature – and specifically, from some vague memory of the "pity and terror" that Aristotle says spectators should feel on witnessing dramatic tragedy – that we derive making you cry as the acid test for deciding when games are good.

The 36-hour animated movie that ends *Metal Gear Solid 4* tries very hard to be a tear-jerker, but for me the most emotionally powerful moment in that game was more rarefied and elusive. As Snake returned to Shadow Moses, the combination of the 16bit interpolation from the original game with the fact that, while I was later playing around with the camera, Snake sighed, "Ah, overhead view. Just like old times," evoked a nagging nostalgia for a world that never existed. This happens to be a highly literary emotion (think of the pastoral genre in increasingly urban early-modern England), but here the game intensifies it by exploiting the fact that the player has actually experienced the nonexistent utopia. The unscripted wandering of the jungle and savannah in *Far Cry 2*, meanwhile, was more affecting to me than the drama of 'buddies': the game provides a world so gorgeously crafted, and so successful in creating a sense of place, that it lingers in the memory, but not in a way that can be captured by a single term of crude emotional taxonomy, and not in a way the designers could have deliberately engineered.

Simlarly, my recent sessions of local co-op Special Ops in *Modern Warfare 2* have been far more 'emotional', in terms of the pleasures of friendship, tension and triumph, than the pseudocinematic narrative twists of the singleplayer campaign. One of the most 'emotional' singleplayer experiences I ever had contained no photorealistic 3D characters but stick figures in an isometric wasteland of grey blocks haunted by the horrible noise of giant ants: no game since has better evoked the bittersweet melancholy of romance in the face of certain doom than Sandy White's *Ant Attack*. Rich emotional response, as that game proves so brilliantly, is an emergent byproduct of fierce and merciless design; it doesn't come magically through the more accurate modelling of facial flesh in semi-interactive cutscenes, or via some new chip or peripheral.

We ought to have learned, at the very least since Sony's trumpeting of PS2's Emotion Engine, to be suspicious of claims that some technology will increase 'emotion' in games. Such promises often smack of an aspiration to psychological dictatorship. A while ago, a Peter Molyneux-inspired comedy Twitter account shared a monstrous thought: 'Natal can tell if you're crying. Imagine if for some reason you had a mission where you were REQUIRED to cry to pass a gate. Interesting...' It is indeed interesting, but you might not want to go there. Imagine, for a start, how it would ruin your makeup.

In a way, this is the logical culmination of a misguided emotional authoritarianism in some strands of game thinking. Instead of worrying about the kinds of emotion a game can or cannot induce in – or even demand of – the player, we ought to be more concerned about how games construct a rich and deep world in which unpredictable and variable emotions will arise naturally.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net




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BY N'GAI CROAL

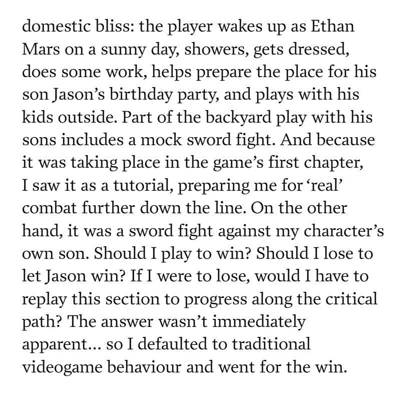
PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

Failure is an option

In a recent **Edge** column, I returned to three topics that are perennial favourites of mine – challenge, difficulty and progression – with regard to the Japanese RPG *Demon's Souls*. Now, as I continue to work my way through Sony's *Heavy Rain*, I think that I may have to isolate a fourth topic to add to this list: failure. To be clear, it's not that I haven't discussed failure before. It's just that in my previous meditations on these topics, failure has been a supporting actor rather than the star; a component of challenge and difficulty; a barrier to progression. But the more I play of *Heavy Rain*, the more I realise that by treating failure not as an impediment or a punishment, but rather as a surmountable outcome or, more intriguingly, as a legitimate option, the more a game can elicit a wider range of emotions and reactions from the player.

Heavy Rain begins with a sequence of domestic bliss: the player wakes up as Ethan Mars on a sunny day, showers, gets dressed, does some work, helps prepare the place for his son Jason's birthday party, and plays with his kids outside. Part of the backyard play with his sons includes a mock sword fight. And because it was taking place in the game's first chapter, I saw it as a tutorial, preparing me for 'real' combat further down the line. On the other hand, it was a sword fight against my character's own son. Should I play to win? Should I lose to let Jason win? If I were to lose, would I have to replay this section to progress along the critical path? The answer wasn't immediately apparent... so I defaulted to traditional videogame behaviour and went for the win.





> Not everything here is a matter of life and death, which made me want to experiment with mistakes when the stakes were lower

Jason took it well, all things considered. So well, in fact, that I began to feel guilty for not allowing him to beat me. (Warning: spoilers ahead.) And that guilt was only magnified in the following sequence when Jason gets hit by a car and killed. Our last extended interaction had been the swordplay in the backyard, and I had selfishly secured the win for myself. This coloured my subsequent interactions with my surviving son, Shaun – it made me a more permissive parent rather than the strict or authoritarian Ethan I would have otherwise been. And it doubled my sense of shame when Shaun disappeared and I couldn't remember what he was wearing when the police were questioning me.

Failure was also the defining characteristic of my 'performance' as Scott Shelby, at least initially. I accidentally left the prostitute to the tender mercies of her boyfriend when I selected 'leave' rather than 'stay'. And even though I did just about everything right during the sequence in which a young criminal was holding up a convenience store, my overly aggressive verbal style riled up the crook to the point where he shot and killed the storekeeper I'd come to question. In an RPG like *Mass Effect 2*, my swaggering style would probably have secured me the desired outcome. Here, I pushed too far and had to suffer the consequences.

Part of what amplifies the sense that failure is more interesting than success in *Heavy Rain* is the way the developers pepper its murder mystery plot with banal activities: flushing toilets, taking sleeping pills, changing a baby's nappy. Not everything here is a matter of life and death, which made me want to experiment with mistakes when the stakes were lower, almost as a way to provide my own comic relief, to relieve some of *Heavy Rain*'s otherwise oppressive gloom. Yet by grounding a certain portion of the game in these everyday activities, the developers created a terrific contrast with the game's more tense moments – crawling over broken glass, driving against traffic on the freeway – allowing them to be nerve-wracking without being completely over the top.

Now, in many other games, I would have hit a Game Over screen and repeated the failed section until I succeeded. Here, I had to accept my failures, mistakes and errors in judgement – both large and small, dramatic and ordinary – and have them sit alongside my successful endeavours, steadily accumulating and subtly shaping my perspective on the events taking place and my own role(s) in them. All because the narrative structure is in many cases flexible enough – or gives the appearance of being sufficiently malleable – to accommodate a certain amount of failure.

This extends to the playable characters themselves. By having four leads, one or more can die without forestalling the player from getting to the end through the surviving character. Rather than a single, superheroic lead character who must ultimately succeed in order to proceed, each protagonist can be portrayed differently – both by the developer and by the player. One character can be heroic, succeeding every time he or she takes the stage, while another character stumbles and bumbles through the action. To err is human; for videogames to accommodate failure is divine.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com









SATURDAY 24 JULY 2010 | SUNDAY 25 JULY 2010



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Issue 213



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

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Topic: Tax breaks for the games industry?

Is it too little too late from our politicians? Quite a few of the UK's game developers have already gone to the wall in the last couple of years after years of asking for tax breaks in order to level the playing field with places like Canada.

If a party makes these concessions to the games industry would it make you change your vote? Does it really matter where your favourite game originates?
Heavy Voodoo

Alastair Darling just stated that the government are going to give help to the videogames industry similar to what they give the film industry. So, there we go.
Eregol

So all games are now going to be made by Channel 4 films and funded by the Lottery?
PermiaN

As long as they aren't all about gruff northerners, I'll be happy.
Diluted Dante

I am saddened by many things in this world. Potato waffles provide one not-so-appropriate example (why pose as something far superior to yourself? It's only going to cause negative comparisons to be drawn, and disappointment for many people who are expecting to be treated to the real deal).

In any case, what I was saddened by when reading my latest edition of **Edge** (**E**213) was the feeling of negativity that emanated from the words, lines and paragraphs of almost every page, culminating in a crushingly harsh review of *Final Fantasy XIII* (and I mean the words, not the score). I have noticed increasing amounts of negativity within each subsequent edition of **Edge**, and can only satisfy me so far. Indeed, the last time **Edge** sounded truly happy in relation to videogames was the review of *Bayonetta*, back in the Christmas edition.

Perhaps I am reading too much into this, and perhaps it's nothing, but it just seems a huge shame to be doing something which many people would consider to be a dream job (myself included) and not be enjoying the experience. I suppose with the mountains of incredibly cheaply produced and truly awful games being released nowadays, negativity about the gaming industry can be hard to shake. I expect the apocalyptic level of panic about the Japanese gaming industry can't be helping the situation either.

Cheer up, and remember: just because there are so many potato waffles, it doesn't mean that true, sweet Belgian waffles are any less awesome

have previously attributed it to the somewhat lovable pretentious edge that **Edge** has always had. Now I feel it may be something more than that. Now, the most positive of the emotions conveyed within the magazine is a grumbling apathy.

I do of course realise that to be a critic one must remain somewhat neutral, and obviously be ready to point out flaws, but I also expect one to have some passion for the path of specialist journalism taken. Has **Edge** fallen out of love with videogames?

Previews are now pessimistic lists of faults, void of any cautious excitement, or indeed much human quality at all. Reviews (despite the scores remaining on a consistent level) generally focus on the criticisms, rather than any joy included in the gaming experience. The expert use of language

Perhaps it is I who has been over-exposed to **Edge**, and so the grumbling, unhappy nature of the magazine is just starting to become overly apparent to me. Either way, it wouldn't hurt to get a little giddy over something every now and again.

Cheer up, and remember: just because there are so many potato waffles, it doesn't mean that true, sweet Belgian waffles are any less awesome. You can take that as an analogy, or just a straight waffle-based comment. Your call.

Matthew Leigh

There hasn't been another *Bayonetta* since *Bayonetta*. But what about the *LA Noire* cover story in **E**213? It's one of many articles about exciting-looking upcoming prospects you must've missed recently. And hopefully our

Letter of the month wins a DSi

retrospectives on the games of the last decade have been doing a little bit of justice to some of the greats, too. As for the other thing, negativity about quick-fix food can be hard to shake, and the level of panic about the nation's obesity levels can't help, but don't knock the potato waffle – it's a solid base for a snack in a hurry.

I love your magazine. But, as we all know, love is complicated. I was going through my RSS feeds when I noticed the *Final Fantasy XIII* review on your website. Being a big fan of this franchise, too, I clicked to said review only to be left feeling bewildered, angry and somewhat disappointed. That's not to say anything about the review itself, though.

The review mentions the fact that the producers were concerned about western criticism levelled at the first 20 or so hours of the game, and then goes on to say it understood why it is so but still feels that it is rubbish. Rubbish? Is that it? What about the story, then (which happens to be the focus of the first 20 hours)? For a magazine that, over several issues, has gone out of its way to acknowledge this aspect of gaming while not forgetting other aspects only to dismiss it in this review is a mistake. Understanding that



story is going to be a big thing in *FFXIII* (20 hours big!) as it has been in all other *Final Fantasy* games, why overlook it to concentrate on the gameplay? Any *FF* fan knows that each instalment will be different from the last, but also should know that story is integral to the franchise's success as a whole. I look forward to playing each new instalment mainly because of the story aspect, and I know I can't be the only one who thinks that. For me, gameplay is an extremely elaborate and enticing 'bonus feature' of the franchise and it seems that this time Square Enix has come up with the goods for all aspects of the franchise. Ignoring the score, that was my only issue with the review and time they make for more interesting reading than the review itself does.
David Murby

Our perspective is that gameplay shouldn't be a 'bonus feature' but a fundamental consideration. But you're right about story and characterisation when it comes to Square's most famous series: it's enormously important. And we challenge anyone to put *FFXIII*'s alongside the best in the series.

I have a habit of getting overexcited about games, only to be disappointed once they're released. I place my hopes for the future of videogame storytelling on the shoulders of whichever upcoming game seems fit enough to carry the torch, but it usually comes up short. Sometimes a game like *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* will surprise me with an incredibly well-written and executed story. Other games are like *Heavy Rain*.

I expected some issues with the gameplay, maybe some clunky controls or some technical rough spots. What I didn't expect was for it to be badly written

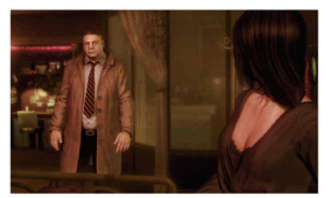
Heavy Rain is a game that needs no introduction to those who have been exposed to David Cage's overbearing prophesying of his brainchild bringing forth a new era in games as an art form, and I have to say that I was one of many wrapped up in the hype. I would carry the word out, telling anybody who would listen about what *Heavy Rain* would do to put games on the map as a medium that can be taken seriously. In a world filled to the brim with space marines, scantily clad sorceresses and giant enemy crabs, I was aching for a game grounded in reality with an engrossing story. Sure, it wouldn't be without its problems – I expected some issues with the gameplay, maybe some clunky controls or some technical rough spots. What I didn't expect was for it to be badly written.

It's so painfully ironic that as much as David Cage bemoaned the poor standard of writing in videogames, it was the very core interactivity of the medium he criticised that saved his game from being an incredible narrative failure. Without the inherent attachment that comes from having a hand in the story, *Heavy Rain* would not have been nearly as emotionally affecting as it was.

Heavy Rain was touted as being the harbinger of a renaissance in interactive storytelling. As it is, it's a very pretty experiment; a story that's fun to experience at first, but completely falls apart as soon as the slightest thought is given to what's actually happening. With plot holes one could drive an 18-wheeler through, it's a mess. But all of these problems are indescribably miniscule compared to what I feel is *Heavy Rain*'s greatest trespass: it lied to the player.

From the beginning, the player is made aware of each character's thoughts, motivations, concerns and intentions. It is through this information, ideally, that the player creates his world view, roleplays the characters and makes educated decisions based on the data before him. But in order to pull off its third-act twist, the game chooses to throw out everything the player has established for the only character I had any love

Continued


Walter Tran had big expectations for *Heavy Rain*, but accuses the game of being dishonest in order to accommodate its third-act twist

does not warrant all the feelings I had. So where did they come from?

Well, it was the fallout, which, in my opinion, can be attributed to the mistake described above.

Alex Walker commented: "I'd argue that a game that takes 25 hours to get to the point would count as a serious flaw."

While his comment was short and sweet, it reflected the views of a lot of other people after having read this review. I, on the other hand, can't wait to sit back and enjoy it as, for me, the point lies within those 25 hours.

There are obviously loads more comments to read. Unfortunately, this


David Murby believes we should've focused more on *Final Fantasy XIII*'s narrative content in last issue's review



Topic: Role playing or stat frenzy?

Deciding whether or not to buy *FFXIII* got me thinking about the way we play RPGs and how we manage our characters in them.

The *Final Fantasy* series and other JRPGs that I have played have always been fairly limiting from a character-moulding perspective, to the point where *FFXII* was a major departure for allowing you to customise your weapon classes – which, ironically, I felt actually removed a huge part of what defines a JRPG character.

So would you sacrifice the 'perfect' character build for extra personality or cosmetic reasons, or do you play your RPGs with a constant eye on the numbers and figures like a strategy game?
Time on my hands

In terms of roleplaying I prefer the western-style approach. I like it when my choices actually make a difference, no matter how insubstantial. My current darling, *Mass Effect 2*, has barely any stats at all but IMO is a more of a roleplaying experience because your choices really matter.
Dogfingers

Hold on, isn't playing a role of a character in a set story roleplaying anyway? I think I know what Dogfingers is saying, and I'd take role-playing over stats anytime. I don't gel with western RPGs much, and they tend to be statfests, while as you have just pointed out, JRPGs are just a matter of jumping into a role and going along with the story and characters.

It is the characterisation and story development of JRPGs that I enjoy, rather than the character building and choice-making of western RPGs with their dull stories and characters.
hylian_elf

Probably, but then this means *Gears Of War*, *Halo*, *Streets Of Rage* and most games in general could be classed as RPGs.
Dogfingers

for and give the player the figurative middle finger.

At the climax (or at least the one that I experienced), I had another character shoot this two-faced character as many times as the game would let me pull the trigger. Not because I thought it would be dramatically appropriate for the story, but because I was just so angry! I had been betrayed – by the character; by the game. I had taken the gameplay mechanics to heart and become immersed in the story accordingly, only to have the rug pulled out from under me. I watched in horror as my favourite character was twisted and changed in a contrived way only fit for a schlocky, springtime B-movie thriller. This person deserved better.

So my feelings are understandably mixed. On one hand, I feel gaming deserves a hurrah for getting me so emotionally invested in this story no matter the context: the act of playing alongside a character, guiding him as it were, is capable of creating a bond greater than any other medium can conjure. The hours spent with this person all go toward establishing this companionship between player and character, and that is what I think is gaming's greatest strength. On the other hand, I wish most games wouldn't feel the need to repeatedly bash me over the head with a stupid stick.

Walter Tran

I am 31 years old and have been playing games since I was able to hold a joypad. I have lived through and enjoyed the humble beginnings of the games console with the Atari 2600. I beat my own leg with frustration while playing *Contra*, marvelled at a certain Italian tradesman on the NES and cursed Dr Robotnik and his unholy contraptions. Of course, progress is relentless: 2600, NES, Master System, Mega Drive, SNES, N64, Dreamcast, PS1, PS2, GameCube, Xbox... to name a chosen few. The development of the games console brought with it advances in graphics and hardware, but more importantly to me, characters and tales with such a rich history that made them feel as though they had existed forever. Akin to Tolkien with Gandalf, Aragorn and the gang, so Hideo Kojima with Snake, Foxhound et al, Shigeru Miyamoto with Link and the land of Hyrule, and to a lesser degree Shinji Mikami with survival horror and Raccoon City. These were the narrative-driven, contextually rich worlds in which I lost myself.

I now have a wife, mortgage and two children (as well as all the aforementioned consoles!). I work for a large international company that has its own social forum, of which videogames is a popular discussion topic. However, the topic of conversation invariably centres on online battles, the amount of kills, frags, flags captured, killstreaks – the terminology goes on and on. This phenomenon seems to be the future of gaming. It may well also be symptomatic of the throwaway society in which we live.

I am concerned that gamers no longer have the same affection as me for the singleplayer campaign. Moreover, I worry that the appetite has been lost amongst game developers too.

There was life before *Modern Warfare*, *Left 4 Dead* and *Halo 3*. The games industry flourished, in fact. The Master Chief has a rich and detailed past if you care to look beyond his life on the 360. *Resident Evil* was not always run and gun, and Snake didn't always bring with him fragmented rambling cutscenes (actually, scratch that last one).

I have seen the widely praised *Uncharted 2* and *BioShock*, both modern-day gems that embrace all I want to see in a videogame – escapism, rich characterisation, and a hugely immersive story – criticised for their online limitations. Who decided this as a measurement of quality? Individuals consider themselves as 'veterans' of *COD4* or *Halo 3*, yet have never played their campaigns or their previous incarnations. This simply does not sit comfortably with me.

Who am I to question or halt progress? Clearly the future of gaming will continue to move in this direction. I just hope that the modern gamer and developers alike do not forget the gamer with one foot in the 32bit era and the characters and stories that were born there – and before.

Adam Saunders



***Uncharted 2*'s multiplayer component may not be as fully featured as, say, *Modern Warfare 2*'s, but Adam Saunders is all about the singleplayer game**

Narrative will always remain a driving force in gaming. (Although, er, didn't the point-and-click adventure genre look healthy once upon a time? Mmm.) For now, take a break from online FPS chatter overload with your new DSi.

I can understand guns featuring on your recent covers. After all, a lot of game genres feature guns of some sort. What I can't figure out is why survival expert Ray Mears is on the cover of **E**213.

Kevin Clifford



Topic: Non games

With titles like *Flower*, *Linger In Shadows*, *Aqua Vita* and *Noby Noby Boy* on the PSN as well as full-price releases like *Heavy Rain* and *Afrika* and the obviously not intended as games like VidZone, Mainichi Issou and iPlayer, I wonder if PlayStation has forgotten about play? Do these bits of code enrich our little world or are they just distractions from the real business of playing?

Personally, I like a lot of them. I treat them the same way I would a wall-hanging; many are easy to appreciate and partake in. I worry, though, that if more industry money is pumped in that direction to entice 'non-gamers' or, as the boardrooms would prefer, 'not-as-yet-gamers', then we'll see less allocated towards projects where gameplay is central. That people may come into the business without a grounding in gaming, and see it as just another medium of abstraction. Then again, why shouldn't an artist be allowed to involve the viewer more fully in his work? I certainly can't think of a reason.

Cockbeard

I've always wondered why Codemasters haven't done a new version of *Music* for so long. Granted we have rhythm-action games anyway, but surely with all the bells and whistles that current-day consoles afford this should make possibilities for a *Music* sequel almost limitless (obviously I know there will be limits).

Eregol

It boggles my mind that we haven't seen a new *Pilotwings* and *Pokémon Snap* on Wii. They'd work a treat with the Remote.

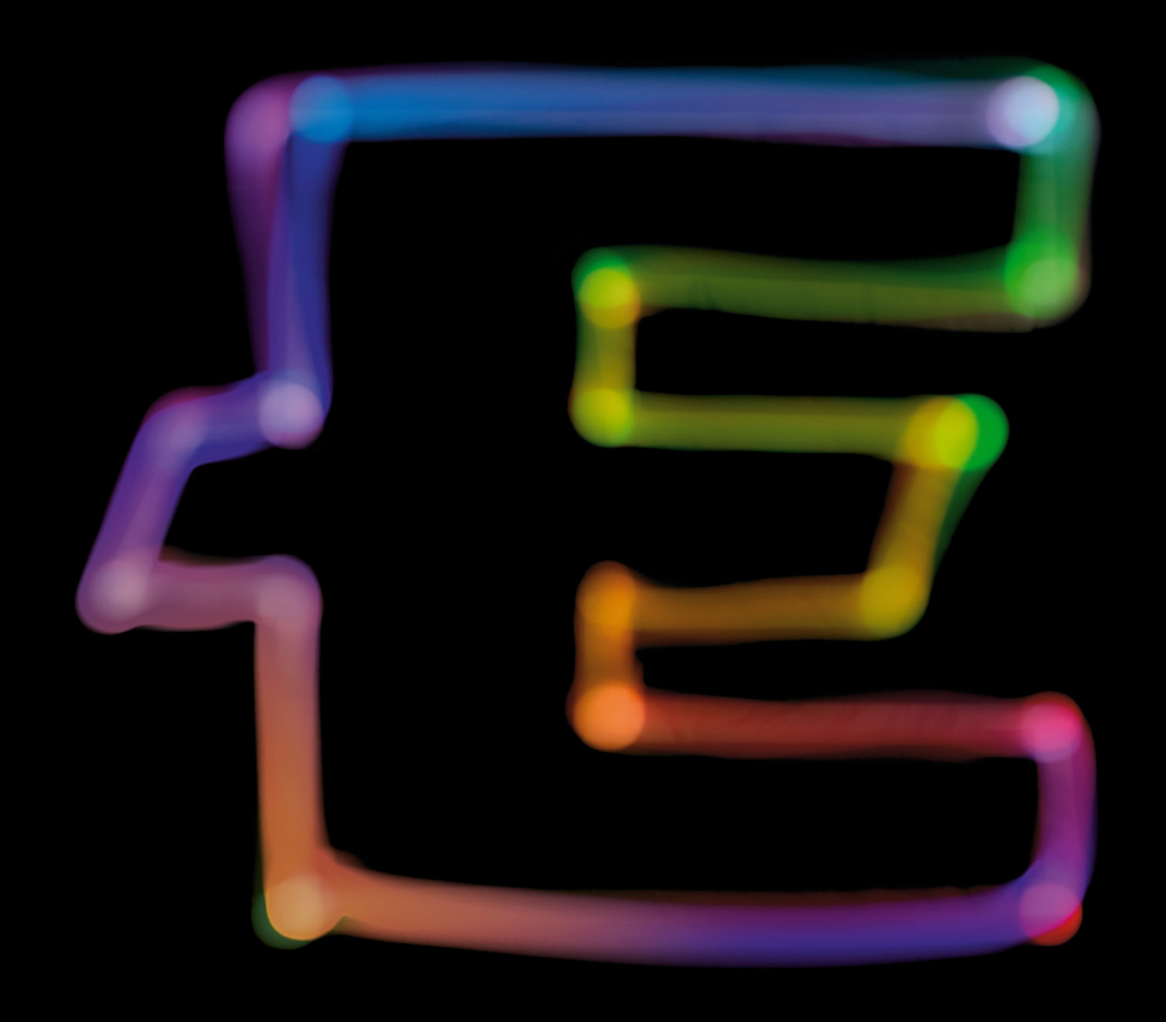
Blue Swirl

While I'd agree that *Noby Noby Boy* isn't really a game, there's no way you could claim that Takahashi ever 'forgot about play' while making it: it's a toy rather than a game, which I think allows for experimentation with far more interesting kinds of play than a traditional game ever could.

moonkeh

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